

# Want to run Evansville’s Mesker Amphitheatre?

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EVANSVILLE – Anyone wanting to lease Evansville’s Mesker Amphitheatre will have to give the city everything from detailed financial statements to a menu for its concession stand.

They will also need to lay out their plan for scheduling performances and proclaim how much money they’re willing to pump into a long-closed concert venue in need of a litany of repairs.

Those are just some of the guidelines listed in a request-for-proposal plan city officials adopted after the Board of Park Commissioners voted to field lease requests for Mesker on July 16. It’s the first real sign the derelict venue could reopen since the city locked its doors in 2012.

The form was uploaded to local government’s online document center a day after the parks board meeting. Running six pages, it lays out 32 requirements for anyone willing to submit a lease proposal. That’s on top of 16 criteria officials will use in determining the winning bidder. That is, if there is one.

“The parks board reserves the right to reject all proposals submitted under this request for proposals,” the document reads.

Here’s what to know about the requirements.

### How long are bids for Mesker open? And when will we know if someone has been accepted?

The window for requests is only open for about a month. Anyone wishing to submit a proposal must do so before 10 a.m. Aug. 22.

The parks board would then interview any promising candidates. The winning proposal would be accepted by Sept. 17, with contract language finalized by Sept. 24.

### How long would the lease last?

Any winning bidder “should assume an initial term of up to five years,” the document states. “... However, the parks board reserves the right to negotiate shorter or longer terms.”

Naturally, the price of the lease is negotiable as well.



The stage of Mesker Amphitheatre is seen Feb. 8, 2024. The venue has been closed since 2012. MACABE BROWN/COURIER & PRESS

### Financial requirements: What kind of offers would qualify?

Obviously, anyone looking to take control of the amphitheater would have to show they have the wherewithal to do so.

They would need to know the complicated ins and outs of running a concert venue and submit their plans to not only to book musical acts, but other “alternative events” as well.

The document, however, mostly focuses on a different qualification: money.

Bidders would have to show they possess the significant capital needed to raise Mesker from the dead. Hopefuls are required to provide the parks board with “complete financial statements for the immediately prior full fiscal year,”

the documents reads. The board could extend that to three years if necessary.

Requesters would have to give the city the “names and addresses of all persons having a financial interest in the offeror’s business – including but not necessarily limited to ... individual owners, partners, limited partners, officers, directors, and shareholders indebted to the company in excess of \$10,000 at the time of submission.”

They’d also need to disclose if some of their funding comes from a trust, and then provide the names of anyone who benefits from or is able to modify that trust. Anyone who owes delinquent taxes or faces other financial penalties would be ineligible to apply under Indiana law.

The document also requires bidders to disclose any litigation in which they’ve been involved in the last five years.

### Would a winning bidder pay for improvements at the amphitheater?

They would at least need to say how much they’d be willing to invest.

The amphitheater last hosted a concert in 2009, when the Doobie Brothers came to town. Since then, its huge concrete pavilion has been stripped of seats, sometimes allowing tree-sized weeds to grow in their place. The metal risers on the stage are inoperable, the

dressing rooms under the stage flood, the number of bathrooms is insufficient, and the pavilion itself is incredibly steep, putting it miles away from modern ADA compliance.

The brick walls are also strewn with random, bizarre graffiti. That’s all on top of the smaller, nagging issues that blossom when a place sits empty as long as Mesker.

Former Mayor Lloyd Winnecke’s administration commissioned a study that put the cost of improvements at around \$12 million – and that was back in 2012. It’s all part of a pattern of neglect that has plagued the place almost since the moment it opened in 1952.

A potential tenant would have to give officials a “plan for capital improvements to the facility, including nature of improvements and estimated amount offeror is committing to invest.”

Once the lease is up, any improvements paid for by the tenant would become the city’s property.

### How would they protect animals at Mesker Park Zoo?

Applicants would be required to “work with Mesker Park Zoo & Botanic Garden ... and the Evansville Zoological Society in an effort to minimize disruption from noise, traffic, environmental conditions or encroachments caused or generated by the operation of the facility,” the document reads.

In an interview last year, zoo executive director Erik Beck told the Courier & Press that officials would likely need to build a large, expensive sound wall that could shield the zoo’s sensitive animals from loud music.

### What else? (Hint: they can’t rename the place)

The proposal requires bidders to have deals in place with alcohol and soda providers and lay out how they planned to share concession profits with the city.

One of the more interesting stipulations is that they explicitly acknowledge they’re not allowed to randomly rename the amphitheater. That right rests solely with the parks board.

### Has anyone sent in a request yet?

Officials haven’t said if they’ve fielded an RFP yet. During last week’s meeting, Evansville Parks and Recreation Director Danielle Crook didn’t guarantee one would come in at all.

But the Courier & Press has spoken to at least one group that plans to throw its hat in. Tim Drake, owner of The Mill Event Center and Amphitheater in Terre Haute, said his group is “100% going to put in a proposal.” Acts such as Alabama and ZZ Top are slated to play The Mill this summer.

“We have been waiting for this for so long,” he said of the RFPs.



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