



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

City of Owatonna  
540 West Hills Circle  
Owatonna MN 55060  
(507) 774-7343  
deanna.sheely@owatonna.gov

**Invitation to Attend November 19 Ribbon-Cutting Event**  
***Merrill Hall Renovations Completed***

OWATONNA, Minn., Nov. 7, 2024 – Renovations at the historic Merrill Hall on the West Hills campus have been completed. Community members are invited to attend a ribbon-cutting event to commemorate the completion of the project November 19 at 4:30 p.m. at 560 Dunnell Drive. Doors will be open at 4 p.m.

Last year, a decision was made to renovate Merrill Hall to allow it to continue serving the community's needs. The \$5.3 million project included replacing the deteriorating roof, adding a fire sprinkler system and upgrading the mechanical, electrical, lighting, heating, ventilation and air conditioning. Original architectural elements were preserved including staircase millwork and a mural done in 1938 by Miriam Ibling as part of the Federal Artists Project which will be showcased in a reception area for Little Theatre of Owatonna (LTO) events. The building's original terrazzo and hardwood floors were restored. Several rooms that had been separated into smaller spaces were restored to their original footprints. The Steele County Historical Society and West Hills Commission are working with City staff and the State Historical Preservation Office to commemorate the historical significance of the building and its uses with display panels.

Following a 2022 facilities analysis which identified urgent deferred maintenance needed at Merrill Hall, the City Council expressed interest in maintaining ownership of this and other existing West Hills Campus buildings and identified the Merrill Hall renovations as a priority. Alternatives such as demolishing or selling the building were also discussed. "The City Council is committed to being good stewards of taxpayers' investment in municipally owned historic buildings to allow these spaces to serve the community effectively," said City Council President Greg Schultz. Merrill Hall was built in 1933 as part of the State Public School campus and served in that capacity until 1970.

LTO has been a lessee in Merrill Hall since the 1960s. "On behalf of the board of directors of Little Theatre of Owatonna, I want to thank the City of Owatonna for their hard work and dedication during the construction and upgrades at Merrill Hall. Having the heating/cooling, electrical and roof repairs completed, LTO is excited to welcome the community back into the Sharon Stark auditorium with three fantastic productions during our 59th season starting in February 2025," said Victoria Bartkowiak, LTO Executive Director. Wee Pals Child Care Center has leased space in this City-owned building since the 1980s. Their Executive Director Clairissa Dushek said, "It has been a wonderful experience working with the city of Owatonna as they give Merrill Hall some much needed updates. Wee Pals is very excited to get back into the new and improved building!"

This investment in Merrill Hall aligns with the City's Long Range Asset Plan which guides decisions on improving current facilities and planning, growing and investing in Owatonna's future facilities while delivering the highest value for taxpayers. Please visit [Owatonna.gov/imagineowatonna](https://www.owatonna.gov/imagineowatonna) for additional information.

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