In honor of a pioneer - Ruth Williams

BY SUSAN HERBERT

The historic Bayview Opera House may be renamed in honor of the late Ruth Williams, a pioneer community leader in Bayview-Hunters Point, who died on January 27 at the age of 63.

The board of directors of the century-old landmark voted on Tuesday to hold a public hearing on the proposal to rechristen the building the Ruth Williams Memorial Opera House.

The final decision on the renaming rests with the Arts Commission.

Dr. George Davis, director of the Bayview-Hunters Point Multi-Purpose Senior Center and a member of the Bayview Opera House’s board of directors, said it was fitting that the opera house should bear the name of the woman who virtually saved it from demolition.

“She’s done so much for the community and for the opera house,” Davis said. “She was probably the leading person over the years who promoted the arts and culture of the Bayview-Hunters Point.”

The Bayview Opera House, at Third Street near Oakdale Avenue, was already in a serious state of disrepair when, in 1967, it was riddled with gunfire by the National Guard in reaction to a suspected sniper shooting from the building.

Williams’ last wish

One of her last wishes was that the city release the funds of an already approved $200,000 loan - made to her company, Thro’ Down Industries - to expand a state-of-the-art music production business in Bayview-Hunters Point.

Kevin Williams, human-rights officer with the city’s Human Rights Commission, and Williams’ eldest son, said his mother left him a great legacy.

“She left me her spirit, the spirit to fight for what is right,” he said. “And she should stand up and speak out for a principle, even at the expense of personal loss.”

Kevin Williams said his mother didn’t want to have a big funeral.

“She said what she had done is a matter of record and she didn’t need anyone to repeat what everyone should know,” he said. “Her love for the community was very much like the love for her own children. It was unconditional.”

Ruth Williams is survived by her sons, Kevin, Keith, George Jr., Timothy, Eric, and Glen, and a daughter, Betty Webb.

Civic accomplishments

Williams left a long record of civic accomplishments stretching back to 1962, when she served on the Human Rights Commission Employment Committee.

In the decade that followed, Williams ran a successful Planned Parenthood program that counseled thousands of teenagers about sex, parenting, and drug rehabilitation.

A tireless proponent of economic development in Bayview-Hunters Point, Williams testified before the U.S. Senate on the need for economic support in Bayview-Hunters Point. Her testimony, community leaders say, led to the release of millions of dollars in Housing and Urban Development funds for the area.

After her husband, George, died from hypertension in 1973, she produced a community-wide fundraiser at Candlestick Park, the largest soul and gospel show ever performed in Bayview-Hunters Point. The funds were used to educate residents about hypertension, a silent killer of a high number of African Americans.

Williams founded the Bayview Repertory Theatre Company and wrote and produced 37 plays and musicals at the Bayview Opera House and throughout San Francisco.

She also was the founder of the Jackie Robinson Garden Apartments in Hunters Point, a 3,000-unit affordable-housing complex for low-income residents and the first of its kind to be built in Bayview-Hunters Point.

Supervisor Willie B. Kennedy, who knew Williams for 25 years, lauded her dedication to her community.

“Over the years, she was always one who cared about her community, and she fought hard to make changes to the betterment of the community,” Kennedy said. “She reached out to help others, even while she was raising her own children.”