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Theater Square Changes a Done Deal

By Andrea A. Firth

A change is underway, and the empty storefronts that have plagued the rear section of Theater Square may be no longer. "The changes before us are reasonably balanced and forward thinking," stated Steve Glazer as he and his fellow Orinda City Council members voted unanimously to re-zone parts of the ground floor of Theater Square and amend the City's agreement with the owner, GLL Properties. These changes will broaden the types of businesses that can lease space on the first floor of Theater Square beyond retail outlets and restaurants and allow banks and medical, dental and professional offices to occupy space in the back of the Square.

"We want the opportunity to lease the [vacant ground floor area in Theater Square] and the new agreement and the amendment to the zoning designation is going to make that happen," stated Chris Quiett, the representative from GLL Properties, in his comments to the City Council. Quiett acknowledged that reaching the agreement took almost two years, but he was satisfied with the outcome. "Everyone seems to be pushing in the same direction," he added.

Everyone included the new owners of the Orinda Theater, James Sheehan and Tom Peterson, who were also on hand to encourage and support the Council's decisions. The preservation and commercial viability of the Orinda Theater, which the City identifies as an important focal point for the community, has been a key element of the discussion during the City's negotiations with the Theater Square owners. Sheehan and Peterson recently entered into a 15-year lease agreement with GLL Properties. Laura Abrams, a leader of the Lamorinda Film and Entertainment Foundation—a group of Orinda residents committed to the survival of theater, also expressed her organization's support of the Council's decision. "I think the language of the agreement supports and protects the long-term viability of the theater," stated Abrams, adding that commercial success for the new operators and sustainability of the theater are contingent upon controlling the rent and increasing attendance.

Orinda Theater Picket Line By A. Firth





Photo Doug Kohen

Over the past two weeks, some patrons of the Orinda Theater have found that after getting in line to purchase movie tickets, they then have had to cross the line—that is the picket line. Union projectionists have been picketing outside the Orinda Theater during evening show times on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, and they will be there "for as long as it takes" according to Jason Mottley, the Business Agent for Local 169 of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees. According to Mottley, two members of Local 169, a projectionist/technician who had worked for at the theater for 13 years and a projectionist/theater manager who had worked at the theater for 4 years, were given a one-day notice regarding the theater's ownership change and termination of their employment.

Mottley described a preliminary offer from James Sheehan, who took ownership of the Orinda Theater with partner Tom Peterson on May 7th, of one eight-hour shift a week as not a viable employment option and insufficient for the union workers to maintain quality operations at the theater. Per Mottley, the two projectionists had been working 30 to 35 hours per week before being let go.

Sheehan, who has worked with union projectionists at other theaters, indicated that he and his partner are willing to negotiate with the projectionists, but that the contract will require new terms similar to union contracts that projectionists have with independently-operated theaters in Berkeley and Albany. Mottley indicated that there had been no direct communication between the parties over the past two weeks, and he was unable to comment on the proposal.

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