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A Short Reprieve For the Rheem Theatre

By Sophie Braccini

Nearly 100 concerned citizens attended the June 10 Town Council meeting to learn the fate of The New Rheem Theatre, after management announced June 6 that the prominent venue would close at the end of the month due to a 60 percent increase in rent.

Over the years, Rheem property owner Mahesh Puri had reduced the rent from \$18,000 to \$10,000, then \$5,000, subsidizing the theater's operations, but said he could no longer afford the costs.

Derek Zemrak, managing member of Zemrak Pirkle Productions, LLC that operates the theater, said they could not afford the rent increase. The property has been for sale since September 2014, with no offers. Fortunately, Town Manager Jill Keimach helped negotiate a reprieve and stated the community would now focus on finding a long-term solution.

During the few days leading up to the council meeting, Keimach met with Puri and Zemrak, and said the town, the owner and the operator reached an agreement to keep movies running until the town can come back with a more developed vision and plan in the next several months. The long-term vision, Keimach explained, is to have an agreement that doesn't involve the historic preservation ordinance. While the property owner can develop other areas of the property, Puri agreed not to demolish the theater building, so the need for the ordinance goes away, she said. While the plan is unknown specifically at this time, Keimach said she felt like all three sides really want to do what's best to keep the theater running as a theater. The plan also involves the development or the formulation of a community foundation. "I think that is key to allowing the community members, the town, and potentially other investors to contribute to a community foundation that in the long term can hopefully have ownership of the theater building, preserving the theater as a theater for movies and community events."

Moraga resident Andy Scheck, owner of Lamorinda Weekly, presented the community foundation idea to the council. Scheck came up with the idea for a foundation in Moraga after his involvement in a project the Lafayette Community Foundation helped to complete. "After I was informed that the theater would have to close because the subsidized rent would go up, I decided now is the time to start the Moraga Community Foundation," he said. Prior to establishing the foundation, Scheck plans to present the foundation's means and vision to the community at an information meeting scheduled at 7 p.m. June 23 at the Holy Trinity Cultural Center, 1700 School Street. While the foundation could help other organizations, the immediate focus would be the preservation of the theater.

Other citizens presented ideas to the council, including two students from Saint Mary's who proposed working with the college so students could use their flex dollars at the concession stand. Resident Richard Harris reminded those in attendance that the first way to support the theater was to go there. "When we go to the movies in Walnut Creek instead of Moraga or Orinda, we are hurting ourselves," he said.

Former councilmember Dale Walwark somewhat dampened the evening's euphoric mood when he noted that the theater had from day one been a money-loser and that all he was hearing were good intentions, but no real solutions. Councilmember Dave Trotter asked him to wait and see.

Kathe Nelson, executive director of the Moraga Chamber of Commerce, along with many other residents, expressed her support, noting the theater brings life, energy and people into town for movies and special events and supports surrounding businesses.

"We all want the same thing, to keep the theater open and active," Keimach said. "It takes a community to get to a crisis and it takes a community to get us out of one. I'm stressing we all need to work together as a community to find a solution."

Keimach expects to present a plan to the council in mid-October.

Community Donates to "Save the Rheem Theatre" GoFundMe Site

Former Moraga resident Pamela Dunn set up a GoFundMe site with a goal to raise \$5,000 in two

weeks to offset the rent increase at the New Rheem Theatre until a nonprofit foundation within the Moraga community was operational. As of Monday, June 15, the goal was already surpassed by \$491. "We started the fund Thursday and by Saturday we reached our goal," Dunn said. An anonymous \$2,000 donation put it over the top. "The community really stepped up," she said. Two boys, ages 9 and 11, gave \$100 and said, "We don't want our theater to close." For updated information about the community effort, visit <http://www.gofundme.com/wt689k>.

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[back](#)

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