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Park Theater plans still in place as continued contributions sought

By Lou Fancher

Small cinemas, especially theaters in which key stakeholders are members of the community and the foundations of the organization are steeped in local values, such as sustainability and ethical and sound fiscal practices, are a tremendous asset, according to The Park Theater Trust board president and fundraising chair Kathy Bowles. "The re-opening of the theater will bring to every single demographic in our town a huge boon. We have data that shows how important a community theater is and what it can bring. Our model improves upon that because it is not just a movie theater. Movies will be first and foremost, of course, but music events, talks, community forums, and other live performances will mean it is a synergistic space for everyone," says Bowles.

The League of Historic American Theaters in a November 2022 Economic Impact Study reported, "A single historic theater in a small city has the potential to sustain 37 full-time equivalent jobs, create \$1.2 million in total expenditures, generate \$100,700 in revenue for state and local governments, and add \$790,179 to household incomes in the community."

CFO and board member Tracey Karsten Farrell says it's rare when a civic project provides considerable economic opportunity, cultural expansion, and varied levels of investment and ownership. "Anyone can participate. We get million dollar donations from family foundations and \$5 donations from kids. It's remarkable. And when people see the plans, or attend onsite visits we've held, their eyes light up. They realize that in the heart of our downtown there will be a center of entertainment, learning, and engagement."

TPTT purchased the property in November 2021 after the city invited TPTT to explore refurbishing and operating the theater in 2018 and a \$12 million capital campaign to purchase, save and renovate the historic Park Theater was launched - with an initial \$3 million dollars raised. Since that time, Farrell notes that an additional \$3 million in pledges have been raised towards the remaining \$9 million needed to complete the renovation, representing over 50% of the project's total cost.

Pledges include \$1 million from the Hofmann Family Foundation towards the Park Theater Renovation Campaign. Lisa Hofmann Morgan, director of the Foundation, in emailed comments, wrote how important it is to preserve and protect the city's history. "We are thankful to the Park Theater Trust and the private sector for making these projects possible."

Significant contributions have also arrived from Lafayette resident Linda Drucker, with a donation match from her employer, Bank of the West now Bank of Montreal. The Community Foundation of Lafayette, The Livable Communities Trust of Contra Costa, Mechanics Bank, successful local fundraisers hosted by Rêve Bistro and Hideout Kitchen, and donations from family foundations and private individuals show the community support for the project.

Even so, Farrell says aggressive effort aimed for more corporate support continues and will be essential for the renovations to begin. An upcoming major fundraiser for 2023 is a benefit golf tournament sponsored by Bali Construction at the Orinda Country Club on Aug. 28. A field of 92 golfers will compete in open play on the well-regarded and challenging Willie Watson-designed course.

"Our board has decided that to be good fiscal agents, we have to have at least 80% of the construction costs raised before the construction begins," says Bowles.

Uniquely, the theater once it is open will need only minimal funding support as CinemaSF will lease the building from TPTT and pay rent into a sinking fund to preserve and protect the building for future generations. TPTT is an all-volunteer 501(c)3 nonprofit and there are no investors. "We've kept up with expenses along the way so we can move it forward immediately when we have the funding," Farrell says. Younger Lafayette residents have also been involved from the beginning. "One of the reasons we initially started looking into the Park Theater at the city's request was going to the stakeholders. We knew younger people needed to be involved. Right away the students from Acalanes were interested in helping," says Bowles, who recalls the project's earliest days. "They formed a Park Theater Booster Club in 2023 and have been actively supporting TPTT at local community events like the Earth Day festival and Rock the Plaza. They are organizing efforts to have booths at sporting events this year to raise awareness. My sense is they feel it's a wonderful, exciting opportunity to focus on arts and culture; to bring in music events, small theater, and other activities that highlight the cultural scene."

Farrell says, "We've really seen they want to get their fellow students energized. They hand out popcorn made by our popcorn machine and talk about having movie days for just Acalanes students. These students took it upon themselves to find a faculty advisor and put on community events."

Acalanes student Clark Laskey of Lafayette Troop 200 is working on raising funds to restore and refurbish the classic cast metal letters that have announced movies at the Park since 1941 to achieve his Eagle Scout status.

Bowles admits there is stiff competition for community members' time, attention and resources. "We can talk about programming or what a day in the life of the Park Theater might look like, but until we can break through other noise, it's hard. We use social media, going to chamber of commerce events and city council meetings. We've gone to small backyard gatherings with 15 people and to large community events. Honestly, to move this forward, it's increased public awareness along with money that we need more than anything else."

Farrell says their outreach efforts will remain unchanged, as will their commitment to reaching the end

game and opening a new, vital community resource. "One of the most successful approaches of our community outreach is being everywhere we can," she says. "One of the most frequent questions we get asked is when the theater will open. We can't yet say when, but we can say that with community support, it will."

Final schematics created by the design team from Arcsine Architecture and Shalleck Collaborative are available on the Park Theater website www.parktheatertrust.org, along with extensive information about the project and the trust.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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