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Town Seeks Ways to Help Theater

By *Sophie Braccini*

Over the past seven years the Rheem Theatre has changed operators numerous times as one business owner after another threw in the towel. Every time, the community rallied in support; but in the words of the current operator, an independent movie theater in a small town cannot be a for-profit business. There are many people who want the historic building to be preserved and operated as a theater; they view it as a community building and 'defining place' for Moraga. The support is so widespread that the Moraga Town Council included looking for ways to support the private business, within the confine of its limited abilities, among its goals for 2013. The council began its discussion March 13. Council members agreed on small first steps, but more significant town engagement may follow.

"We have to ask two questions," said Parks and Recreation Director Jay Ingram as he presented the staff report to the council. "Is the building worth saving? Is its use as a movie theater important enough to the community?" He suggested possible ways the town could support the theater, including waiving planning fees, giving it historical landmark status, signing a sub-lease agreement with the parks and recreation department for classes and camps that could be held there when movies aren't playing, and financing some of the theater's equipment needs with low interest loans.

Residents came to testify about the importance of the Rheem Theatre to the cultural and recreational life of Moraga—many community events are held at the theater.

"People have asked why the chamber of commerce has been supporting the movie theater more than it does any other business," said past chamber president Edy Schwartz. "The Rheem Theatre is a foundation of our community and of our business community and needs to be supported in a very different way." Schwartz demonstrated the level of community support by pointing out that it took only six weeks to raise money for a new elevator, and offered information about growing attendance at the theater at a time when general attendance nationwide is decreasing. The theater's importance was not challenged by the council. The four members present agreed with the residents and answered yes to Ingram's two questions. However, they had reservations stemming from the fuzziness of the figures and a process of using public money to support a private venture.

The theater has major needs - in addition to the new elevator, second bathrooms must be made accessible to disabled patrons and expensive digital projectors have to be purchased; it's unclear what the life span of these projectors would be.

Another major hurdle is that the current lease between property owner Mahesh Puri and the theater's operator, the California Annual Independent Film Festival Association, is expiring within a year.

"This is mostly a problem between a tenant and a property owner," said resident Maureen Freeman, who added that she supports the theater but believes that the town should not mingle in a private business venture.

Puri and his wife, Minoo, attended the meeting. They confirmed their support for their tenant but explained this piece of property, that comprises five other adjacent businesses, was not a profitable investment and had not been for years.

CAIFFA's Leonard Pirkle substantiated that support by explaining that Puri had reduced the rent, but he added that the Rheem Theatre would never make a profit. "Why not just put a stake through it then? Because it's a work of passion," he said.

CAIFFA also operates the Orinda Theatre. "Things are easier there because the movie theater is part of a larger business pool to draw from and the property owner was able to invest and buy all the digital projectors," said Pirkle.

The council decided that all it can do for now is to waive fees for the theater when it applies for permits and encourage discussions about designating the theater a historical landmark. "That would help with some of the state requirements," explained the town's planning director, Shawna Brekke-Read. "We did it for the Pavilion (at the Hacienda de las Flores) and were authorized to build only one unisex ADA bathroom instead of two in order to preserve the interior." A historic landmark designation protects the physical features of a building, not its usage.

The council felt it could not use public funds to support the theater at this time. Town Manager Jill Keimach indicated that in order for a public entity to support a private venture, it had to demonstrate public benefits beyond its primary business function, and have a complete financial picture.

Staff was directed by the council to work on those findings. CAIFFA and Puri are starting their negotiations for a long term lease and working to clarify the financial elements. Planning staff will also meet with Puri to discuss possible historical landmark status.

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