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First Steps Made for Moraga Community Foundation

By Cathy Tyson

"We need to buy the place!" suggested one resident among roughly 100 who turned out for a kickoff meeting to discuss forming a nonprofit community foundation to save the Rheem Theatre. The focus of the evening was to outline for concerned residents what it takes to start a foundation that could support many other nonprofit and service organizations, with an initial goal of raising money to buy the theater.

The property has been for sale since September of 2014, at a reported asking price of \$4.6 million for the theater and adjacent structures down to Ristorante Amoroma. There have been no takers so far, and it is unclear what the cost would be for only the theater portion of the parcel. Currently Town Manager Jill Keimach has negotiated a reprieve for the theater after meeting with property owner Mahesh Puri and theater operator Derek Zemrak; all intend to work on a long-term solution to keep the theater open.

The publisher of the Lamorinda Weekly, Andy Scheck, organized the launch event and has already filed the corporation papers for the Moraga Community Foundation, but official approval from the IRS for the nonprofit status takes some time. Meanwhile the Lafayette Community Foundation has set up a separate fund for the Moraga Community Foundation to receive tax-deductible donations. Two guest speakers who have experience in starting foundations came from Lafayette and Orinda to share advice. Anne Grodin is one of the original organizers of the Lafayette Community Foundation, and Mark Roberts, former citizen of the year in Orinda was a member of the Orinda Community Foundation for three years.

"The Lafayette Community Foundation started with five folks in my living room in 1999," said Grodin, explaining that it was simply "a group of folks who got together because they love Lafayette so much." A key helping hand in getting the ball rolling was the East Bay Community Foundation, founded in 1928, which offered instruction on setting up bylaws, policies and procedures and gave direction about doing a feasibility study. The Lafayette Community Foundation annually gives away thousands of dollars, but its big focus early on was helping to fund the new Lafayette Library and Learning Center, ultimately donating \$12.7 million dollars.

She cautioned there are "many steps before serious fundraising" and the foundation currently participates in a number of fundraising efforts to raise about \$50,000 per year - from its successful garage tour to the Taste of Lafayette event.

Roberts credits the Lafayette Community Foundation for the existence of the Orinda Community Foundation. Orinda's nonprofit public benefit organization began with the economic downturn of 2008-09 when the City of Orinda stopped discretionary spending. Now the Orinda Community Foundation helps sponsor the Fourth of July events, Lamorinda Idol, the senior transportation service, the Spirit Van, Opera in the Park and more.

Although some said it was reassuring to hear what it takes to get a community foundation off the ground, when the question and answer portion of the evening rolled around, concerns centered on dollars and cents.

Pointing out that the theater has opened and closed several times in history, Scheck believes there needs to be both a short-term solution and a long-term solution. Estimating that it will cost between \$2,000 to \$3,000 per month to keep the doors open in the near term, Scheck would like to get a committee of volunteers together to look into specifics, perhaps increasing membership numbers or hosting fundraising events. The landlord has reduced the rent from \$18,000 to \$5,000, but can't afford to keep the rent artificially low.

One major concern was the potential sale of the property - the owner may get a better offer before the Moraga Community Foundation is able to take action. "When it goes, it goes," said Scheck, encouraging attendees that the time to get started is now.

Moraga councilmember Dave Trotter commented on the short-term need - pointing out that \$5,000 was raised in 36 hours over the Internet via crowdfunding to keep the theater's doors open. He

added that the town, along with other members of the town council, are supportive of the project. Regarding long-term needs, Leonard Pirkle, co-operator with Zemrak of both the Rheem and the Orinda theaters, spoke up to help clarify the complicated situation. "The landlord has reached his limit," he said, noting there are not enough admissions to keep it open, and in July the rent went up 60 percent. "We don't make money there."

Moving forward, it was suggested to come back with plans that spell out specific costs and a timeline to the community to further gauge support. It appeared that there was a substantial amount of community interest in keeping the theater open, but it will take real effort to make it happen.

For information about the Moraga Community Foundation and how to get involved, visit moragacommunityfoundation.org. A video recording of the June 24 kickoff meeting is available on the website.

Meet the Newly Appointed Moraga Community Foundation Board

The Moraga Community Foundation appointed the following members to its board: Edy Schwartz, Sam Sperry, Bob Fritzky, Bob Moore, Maridel Moulton, Rob Lucacher and Andy Scheck.

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