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Cinema West takes ownership at Rheem Theatre

By *Sophie Braccini*



David Corkill talks about his projects for the Rheem. Photo Sophie Braccini

Members of the Moraga Community Foundation, which was created to support the Rheem Theatre, gathered at the Moraga venue July 30 to hand the keys to David Corkill of Cinema West, the group that recently acquired the theater. Cinema West plans to renovate and reopen the Rheem by the end of the year.

Until then, the lights will be turned off and all will go quiet at this much-loved landmark until its metamorphosis under the new ownership. More seats will be added to the main theater with electric recliners, and a screen twice as big and pushed farther back will be installed, said Corkill. He confirmed that the historic portion of the building would not be touched.

Cinema West operates 16 theaters, 14 of them in California. Corkill said that a number of them are historic landmarks like the Rheem, such as the Alameda Theater that his partner Kyle Connor and his wife restored in 2005. Their most recent project was the State Theater in Woodland. That theater is listed on the Cinema West website as a "fully restored historic theatre with an attached modern multiplex," with a cafe for movie meals and beverages. The films shown in Cinema West venues are current popular movies such "Toy Story 4," "The Lion King," and "Hobbs & Shaw."

Tom Schnurr, immediate past president of the MCF, recalled how the group gathered under the impetus of the late Edy Schwartz after the past owner put the theater on the market and closed it a year and a half ago. The foundation had planned to buy the theater and make it a community-run venue, and raised enough money to keep the movie theater afloat while negotiations were conducted with the owner, with support by the town of Moraga. A lease was signed with the MCF and the theater reopened.

Thanks to generous donors, the MCF spent \$35,000 to clean up the building and create a safe environment for Lamorinda moviegoers, and for over a year volunteers kept the theater open, taking shifts at the ticket booth or helping in other ways. The July celebration was a tribute to this community spirit. Schnurr saluted all the MCF members who spent countless hours on the project, and who coordinated the many volunteers.

While the prior Rheem owner walked away from the deal offered by MCF, and there was disappointment, Schnurr expressed optimism about the purchase by Cinema West and noted the other projects MCF will be working on, such as the renovation of the bathrooms at the Moraga Commons Park to bring the facilities up to par in amenities and accessibility at the all-access-playground that the Moraga Rotary funded at that location.



Photo Wendy Scheck

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[back](#)

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