

Effort launched to save 1927 Carlsbad Village theater from becoming a restaurant or retail shop

Group wants to prevent 328-seat movie house in downtown from being demolished

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Residents hope to keep the theater in the 1927 Carlsbad Village theater building.

(Phil Diehl)

CARLSBAD —

A Carlsbad filmmaker and video producer is leading an effort to save the Carlsbad Village theater, a vacant downtown State Street venue that opened in 1927 with a showing of the hit Clara Bow silent movie "It."

The building's owner, RPG of Encinitas, is advertising it as available for lease

as restaurant and retail shops on the first floor, with offices and residential units on the second. RPG plans to update the building with a new storefront and facade, but will keep “the historic architecture and feel” of the structure.

That’s not good enough, said Ken Kebow, who recently started the campaign to “keep the Carlsbad Theatre a theater.”

“It’s clear demolishing the theater space is one of the leasing options,” Kebow said. “Carlsbad wants to hold on to this historical landmark for a number of reasons. First, we feel the community needs a common gathering place for events downtown.

“Also, downtown is mostly restaurants, drinking establishments and retail,” he said. “We feel events (movies or live events) at the Carlsbad Theatre would draw some new folks downtown. A great dinner, a classic movie and a drink after the film make for an excellent night out.”

Keeping the theater seats remains an option, RPG President Adam Robinson indicated in a brief email on Wednesday.

“We’re currently talking to multiple (potential) tenants, including theater tenants,” Robinson said.

He said he was traveling outside the country and had no further information about the property, except that so far he had not talked to anyone from the group trying to save the theater.

Downtown Carlsbad regulars have long feared the building could be turned into another craft brewery or restaurant. The theater has been used only occasionally for special events in recent years. The few longtime tenants that shared the building, such as the WaveLength Hair and Nail Salon, have moved out.

Kebow said he grew up going to see movies there when it was the only cinema in town. He sees the 338-seat venue as the ideal place to show

classic films and hold community events.

"I have reached out to the leasing agency, Retail Insite, a number of times and have started to get responses from them," he said, and he hopes to get inside the building soon to get a better idea of its condition and what is needed to preserve it.

Two agents at Retail Insite did not respond to an email asking about the status of the property.

Some people have suggested the theater could be like the Belly Up Tavern in Solana Beach, a popular live-music venue in Solana Beach that attracts people from across the county.

The Carlsbad location is in the heart of the Village neighborhood. It's a half block from the Coaster train station and within walking distance of beachfront motels, outdoor restaurants, coffee shops, retail stores and other attractions.

It's also across the street from the New Village Arts Theatre, which stages live performances in its 100-seat theater and a 60-seat cabaret. Next up is "A Weekend With Pablo Picasso," a one-man tour de force based on Picasso's writings, to be presented Aug. 13 to Sept. 3.

"We are 100 percent supportive," said Kristianne Kurner, founder and executive artistic director of New Village Arts. "We think it would be fantastic to honor that as a film space and have that in our community."

Last year, New Village revamped its building to create an arts center offering lectures, workshops, art classes, and exhibits as well as theater productions. The newly named [Dea Hurston New Village Arts Center](#) honors San Diego playwright Dea Hurston, a longtime arts volunteer and voice for directors, designers and playwrights of color.

Founded in 2001, New Village occupied the Jazzercise headquarters

building in an industrial park near McClellan-Palomar Airport for years before it moved to the former Bauer Lumber warehouse in Carlsbad Village in 2007. The downtown building is owned by the city of Carlsbad, which in 2021 renewed its lease with New Village for 10 more years with two optional five-year extensions.

Maintaining the nearly century-old movie house nearby would help solidify the small arts community that is growing in downtown Carlsbad, Kurner said.

“I really hope that it stays connected with the arts,” she said.

A bronze plaque on the exterior front wall of the building says “The Carlsbad Theatre” was built for \$40,000 by developer and manager A.J. Clark.

In 1939, it was renamed the Iris Theatre, and in 1943 it became the Sylvia Theatre. The Samuels family owned and operated it from 1946 to 1961, when it was again called The Carlsbad Theatre.

Don and Alice Dunham bought the property in 1961 and owned it for more than 25 years, showing movies there until the late 1980s.

Their daughter Judy and her husband, Tom McMahan, took ownership of the building about 1993 and completed major renovations in 1999. The McMahons ran it as a multi-purpose venue for live stage and music productions, large meetings, special events and screen cinema presentations until they decided to sell it and retire in 2013.

County tax records show the property last sold for \$2,245,000 in 2017. The assessed value this year is \$3,836,801, of which \$2,627,946 is the land and \$1,208,855 is the building.