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The Pieces Fall into Place at Theater Square

By Lee Borrowman



Orinda Theatre Photo Andy Scheck

"Every time people in Orinda and Moraga go to the (multiplex) instead of the Orinda Theater, they put another nail in the potential coffin of this theater," said Allen Michaan, outgoing operator of the Orinda Theater, at the Orinda City Council meeting on May 5. Re-zoning Theater Square, he believes, "(is) the best chance for the survival of the Theater."

At this meeting, the City Council voted to introduce an amendment to the zoning designation of a large portion of the ground floor area of Theater Square and discussed changes to the twenty-year old Agreement Regarding the Crossroads Project (the Agreement) that would clear the way for the introduction of new businesses to the Square.

Central to both discussions was the Council's unanimous concern for the continued operation of the Orinda Theater.

Chris Quiett, of Theater Square owner GLL Properties, also spoke at the Council meeting. "The back area of the Square has been a chronic problem to lease," Quiett said, referring to the many failed retail businesses and vacant suites. "With a combination of tenants, we think that over the next eighteen months we will be successful (in leasing the spaces.)"

Filling those vacancies means that GLL can offer an attractive lease package to new theater operators Jim Sheehan and Tom Peterson (who also run Moraga's Rheem Theatre.) On May 7, Sheehan and Peterson signed a five-year lease at what Quiett described as a "significantly discounted rent," with two 5-year renewal options. According to Quiett, the lease is contingent upon the adoption of the zoning ordinance and amended Agreement.

Proposed changes to the Agreement include the removal of restrictions on banks, medical/dental and other professional offices; the Wells Fargo building has always been an exception. They would also allow for restaurants of more than 25 seats and would make possible theater matinees on weekdays (neither of these restrictions has been seriously enforced), which had previously been banned due to parking concerns. GLL would contribute to the design and installation of landscaping and additional signage, and prepare and execute an annual marketing plan for the Square.

The zoning ordinance change represents a major shift in allowed usage. At the present time, the entire ground floor of Theater Square is zoned for retail and restaurant use only. Service type businesses can request discretionary City approval of a commercial use permit to locate in that area. Entourage Spa, for example, obtained a use permit. The ordinance would change the designation of ground floor suites at the back of the Square to allow for retail, restaurant and service business, and additional business types which could be allowed by permit.

Combine the two proposals, and big changes could come to the Square. If adopted, the dual actions would allow banks or savings and loans anywhere in the Square (in the front only by permit.) Medical/dental offices could freely locate on the upper floors, and in the rear of the ground floor by permit.

In support of the amendments Council Member Victoria Smith, who served on the Council's subcommittee that worked with GLL on the proposed changes to the Agreement, explained, "We were cognizant of the need to preserve the Theater for as long as possible...we've tried to reach an agreement that is financially feasible for the operator of Theater Square, recognizing the substantial economic benefit that they are conferring so that we can keep the Theater operating; and as well they made additional concessions to improve things about Theater Square for the benefit of everyone."

The Council instructed the City Attorney to prepare the draft amendment to the Agreement, taking into consideration the Council's concerns for the future of the Theater, and is expected to approve the zoning ordinance at its next scheduled meeting on May 19.

It Takes a Village to Raise a Theater

Laura Abrams, of the Lamorinda Film and Entertainment Foundation (LFEF), came before the City Council on May 5th in support of the proposed zoning and Agreement changes. "It comes down to rent and community support," said Abrams. "The community has to begin to support its theater but the rent is a crucial part of it. LFEF hopes to generate the community support and we're hoping that the new tenant has negotiated a rent structure that we can live with...we really need the new operator in there on May 7," she urged the Council. LFEF has been negotiating with Jim Sheehan and Tom Peterson to rent theater time for revenue-generating community events, such as the Orinda Film Festival, as well as events like Orinda Idol at the Theater to increase community participation. On May 7, Sheehan confirmed to reporter Sophie Braccini that they have agreed to up to 21 days per year in perpetuity for community use of the Theater.



Planning Commission Recommendation

Reach the reporter at: lee@lamorindaweekly.com

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