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What Park Theater renovation means for downtown Lafayette

By Lou Fancher



Photos courtesy Historical Society Lafayette and Jennifer Wake

theaters, input from trade groups, as well as community town halls and forums held to gather feedback. After extensive interviews and detailed analysis of the financials, management practices and RFPs (Response For Proposals) from four top candidates, the TPTT board selected CinemaSF as the theater operator.

CinemaSF is widely recognized in the Bay Area for its well-managed, small, independent cinemas such as the Balboa and Vogue in San Francisco. TPTT board member Jana Corey says their organization was looking for a theater operator with a strong financial track record, an experienced and deep management team, and a clear commitment to the community. "CinemaSF demonstrated strengths in each of these areas and the Board found them to be responsive and keen to work in collaboration with the board to establish our vision for the Park Theater."

Board member Tracey Farrell suggests CinemaSF, in addition to having a solid reputation for establishing and managing viable and sustainable practices to run financially successful independent theaters, is "well-aligned" with the Lafayette community's values. "Not only are their films fun, they know that first-run films are a necessity, that 40% of a theater's intake comes from concessions, not ticket sales, and they were completely in tune with the community's best interests in that regard."

She sites, among other programming priorities, films for families with young children, movies with appeal to the senior community, provocative films that deal with diversity and equity or economic and social injustice or the natural environment and will be tied to community conversations, and special programs geared for audiences with particular needs such as people in the autism spectrum or those people who have Alzheimer's for whom movies provide unique, appreciable, science-backed benefits.

Lifson says CinemaSF was well suited to operate the Park Theater and rose to the top during the interviews because they were the most transparent in sharing their financials, had a proven record of working with the communities in which they currently have theaters and "even though their theaters are all in SF, they understand the vast difference in demographics and really focus the movie selections for each location."

Included in the Park's redesign is a commercial kitchen, which Farrell says is a vital feature the Park Theater will offer to nonprofits renting the facility for galas and other fundraising purposes. "An important part of what we wanted was to align with people, not compete with them. For example, Dennis Markam, the artistic director at Town Hall Theatre has been a part of TPTT from the beginning. We want to fit in with other businesses, which means we'll do great books stuff with Lamorinda bookstores and libraries that can be presented also at Town Hall. Local schools offer another direction: The Park used to show films in sync with students' studies during California History week. With diversity issues and other things today, films are a great way to open up and offer content that leads to discussions."

The Park Theater needs extensive renovations - \$5 million in repairs and upgrades to meet current building codes and offer the aesthetics to make it commercially viable. "You look at the building and it looks pretty dilapidated," says Farrell. "This is community funded, so we have to be realistic. The best news is that we found in a structural assessment we obtained that it's structurally sound. It's built of solid redwood; built like a tank."

When asked about the Park Theater's preservation and significance, Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Jay Lifson says, "The Park has been iconic to what downtown Lafayette had been since the 1940s. Like many other small cities, (the presence of) a closed down movie house represents a (visible) scar, a leftover from what once was. Reimagining a new Park Theater represents what a changing Lafayette can be. Even a single two-screen theater is significant as an alternative to multi-screen theaters that are nearby but will not offer the variety of experience that we envision with the planned format and redesign of the Park Theater."

After an arduous three-and-a-half year process, The Park Theater Trust (TPTT) on Dec. 16 announced it has successfully closed escrow and now owns the city's iconic, historic downtown theater. The all-volunteer nonprofit's rigorous exploration of 25 Bay Area for-profit theater operators included research, site visits to

Farrell says TPTT's crown achievement was the enormous community partnership with the city, which shared all prior surveys and studies and the history of preceding groups who had attempted to preserve the theater. "We also had hard work and perseverance from the task force and a community who were extremely supportive and volunteered where they were able. We needed to establish a drum beat so developers knew if they were coming to the city hoping to get the property, they had to look at us."

Parking emerged in surveys and direct feedback as residents' primary concern. Fortunately, that had been anticipated by the board. "I've been on other boards and professional organizations and from the first meetings we were staying online with the community's best interest," says Farrell.

Lifson says, "When the theater was opened 80 years ago there was no parking ordinance. When it closed 16 years ago it could have reopened within 120 days and it would have been grandfathered in to be used as a theater without increasing the number of parking spaces. That ship left long ago. Then the city initiated a historic overlay district that planned to change the current parking for each of the properties on Plaza Way. This included having each property pay into a fund along with the city to increase the parking allowing all the businesses to share parking. With the purchase of the theater property, which includes a four-plex housing building, they can get closer to achieving that goal."

On the TPTT website under FAQs, the most current information reads: "The City has recently developed a new surface parking lot with 23 spaces within a 5-minute walk of the Park Theater. In addition, TPTT has reached an agreement with the City to re-develop the rear of the property to create additional parking of (approximately) 33 spaces. There are also about 500 spaces - we counted! - within (a quarter) mile of the Park, which does not include possible street parking, private lot opportunities, nor the LLLC garage. The Park Theater will, of course, continue to be highly accessible by foot traffic, ride share, BART, and County Connection bus service as in the past."

CinemaSF's Adam Bergeron anticipates when the remodeled theater opens in 2023, programs "will start with the most classic/popular movies in each specialty category, then move on to `deeper cuts' as we see that there is interest."

Having seen with his own eyes during time spent in Lafayette that the city is "tight-knit and welcoming," Bergeron expects to hire completely from within Lafayette and the surrounding areas. "We hope to be a hub of discourse and debate as well as entertainment. We look forward to engaging with the community on a variety of levels."

To learn more about how to donate, visit www.parktheatertrust.org. For information about CinemaSF, visit <https://www.cinemasf.com/>

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[back](#)

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