

Movie buffs eye downtown Lowell

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LOWELL -- Imagine, in the 1950s, there were nearly a dozen independent movie theaters downtown with names like the Crown, Rialto and State.

According to local historian John Quealey, others included the Capital, Strand, Keith and Palace.

All such majestic names. Now, a group of movie-loving Lowellians with downtown connections has been meeting quietly in hopes of returning just a little piece of the majesty to the downtown business district by opening an independent movie theater.

During the last several months, the group has studied the rich movie-house history of Lowell, taken road trips to numerous urban movie houses throughout New England, researched the projection and sound equipment needed for a venue, developed capital equipment and operating budgets, drafted the necessary nonprofit legal documents, and toured about 15 potential sites in downtown Lowell.

So far, the group has toured multiple properties throughout the downtown including the Saab Building on Central Street, the old Union National Bank building on Merrimack Street, the Merrimac Rug building at the corner of Dutton and Market streets, the old Crown Theater building on Middlesex Street, and the former Sun space on Prescott Street.

The current concept is for a downtown site, 2,500 to 4,000 square-feet with 75 to 125 seats. It would show everything -- from popular box-office second-run titles to classic and Golden Age movies to award-winning and festival-circuit films to documentaries to midnight screenings of cult favorites -- six days and nights per week with periodic film festivals and filmmaker events.

"It would be a gathering place for movie lovers of all ages, from students to seniors," said lawyer Michael Gallagher, who is among those leading the effort. "It would be clean and neat, and have a contemporary feel with first-rate projection and sound equipment."

Served would be freshly made popcorn and locally made treats as well as coffee, soft drinks and, possibly, a premium selection of beer and wine.

Quealey remembers candy bars at the Rialto, his favorite theater, selling for just a few cents.

"My parents used to give me 27 cents," the 76-year-old Lowell Historical Society member recalled, "Twelve cents for the movie and 5 cents each way for the bus to and from the downtown from our home in the Grove.

"Sometimes I'd have a few extra cents for a treat," he remembered.

Ideally, Gallagher said, the theater would also serve as a venue for live performances to supplement the revenue stream from ticket sales.

Now that much of the research and planning is completed, the group is moving ahead on two tracks: identifying the right space and initiating a fundraising campaign. Besides Gallagher, the planning group includes Gallagher's sister and videographer/film editor Caroline Gallagher; Suzanne Cromwell, a downtown Lowell resident who has been one of the prime movers behind the various movie festivals held in Lowell over the past few years; Jay Mason, a Lowell-based architect who has helped restore a number of historic Lowell properties; other lawyers in Gallagher's Shattuck Street law office, including his partner Rich Cavanaugh, Paul Schor and others.

Gallagher said the fundraising campaign is in its infancy. He anticipates needing to raise about \$250,000 to rent a site, and more to purchase a location.

"We want to make it work for as reasonable a price as possible," he said. "But we're all very optimistic because there isn't a single person we floated this idea to who hasn't been excited about it."

Cromwell and Mason agreed.

"Film is the be-all, end-all for me," said Cromwell, a downtown resident and project assistant at the Cultural Organization of Lowell. "Film brings people together like nothing else. Film evokes emotion in the heart and soul like no other form of entertainment. We in the Merrimack Valley are at a loss for trying to see quality independent films other than the Screening Room in Newburyport."

Added Mason: "There is a growing desire and gravity in the community that is moving toward this and will see it through. Personally, I think there is more than a decent change that this will be seen through to its fruition."

The film buffs see the cinema's operation handled by "local talent" or a volunteer staff, Gallagher said, adding: "A large staff isn't needed and those who will be involved are motivated by their love of the movies."

"That is not the biggest challenge," Gallagher added. "The biggest challenge is finding the appropriate space."

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