

# CONTRA COSTA TIMES

## Curtain set to rise on renovation of landmark Pittsburg theater

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Pittsburg is once again setting the stage for renovation of a landmark downtown theater.

For years, Pittsburg leaders, local historians and interested residents have sought to transform the long-vacant California Theater into a community performing arts center they hope could spark a wider renewal of downtown.

After finding funding to take the project off the shelf, Pittsburg recently completed inspecting plans for a structural reinforcement of the interior of the vaudeville theater. The project will be put out to bid later this month, City Manager Marc Grisham said.

If bids come in low, the remaining money could go toward design drawings for the theater portion of the project, he said.

In October, Pittsburg leaders created a long-term plan for future redevelopment projects that included putting \$4.5 million toward starting renovation of the theater.

The first phase of the renovation will include seismic retrofit of the interior, a remodel of the bathrooms to meet disability standards, and restoring lobby and retail space in front of the building, said Maria Aliotti, a city project manager.

The facade of the Beaux-Arts style building and building marquee also will be restored. The hope is that renovation starts this spring and is completed by 2011, Grisham said.

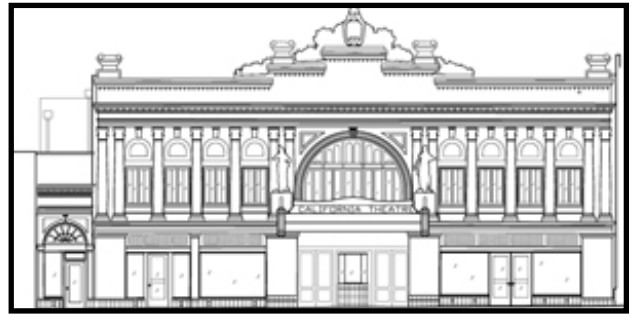
Interior plans differ from those desired by some theater advocates, who think current architectural drawings don't allow adequate seating for the theater to be a significant regional draw.

The plans are "truncated" and limit the number of seats to about 350 when the seating should be closer to 700, said Tom LaFleur, a longtime advocate of reopening the theater. A 2004 feasibility study and early conceptual drawings called for a theater with closer to 700 to 800 seats.

In working with the architect, Aliotti said the city found that the theater has many restrictions when factoring in accommodations for lights and sound equipment, stage depth and possible obstructed views.

The theater must have wider seats along with bigger aisles for disabled patrons, Grisham said. Plans also call for two concrete buttresses in the auditorium for earthquake retrofitting.

"At the end of the day, we want to make this project as safe as possible," Grisham said.



LaFleur contends the concrete walls could be moved away from the middle of the interior and still provide enough support for the building. Further, the current design hampers efforts to bring in larger performances.

"It limits its ability to really function. It's penny wise and pound-foolish," he said, questioning whether the buttress placement was to save costs and why input from residents was ignored.

Grisham said the points made by the community were heard, but the project is "now ready to go."

The California Theater opened in 1920 and closed in 1954. Pittsburg purchased the property in 1970; it has been in disrepair since 1991 when the theater was discovered to have a leaky roof.

In 2006, the city spent \$422,000 for architectural designs for the first phase of the preservation work, along with close to \$630,000 to remove lead, mold, asbestos and bat contamination from the empty theater.

"I'm happy that it was brought up as a priority, and I'm glad it's a priority," LaFleur said. "Having said that, there was a good professional plan from five, six years ago that maximized its success, but it was set aside and City Hall has their own vision. That is unfortunate."

Downtown attorney Ron Johnson shares some of LaFleur's concerns but thinks the theater can be an "energy source" unlike other recent downtown projects. He envisions it enhancing area culture similar to Antioch's El Campanil theater.

"It's a real benefit rather than the direction we were headed," he said.

Grisham hopes construction drawings can be ready by end of the year for the second part of the project, though construction depends on available funding. That portion would include the auditorium.