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Modern Theater proposes 300-seat venue in Coeur d'Alene's Midtown area

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After years of looking for the perfect spot for a larger performance venue in Coeur d'Alene, The Modern Theater believes it has found it.

The nonprofit company proposes building a 300-seat theater with adjoining retail space in the Midtown neighborhood just north of Capone's Pub & Grill. The 31,000-square-foot facility would cost an estimated \$12 million and open by 2022, according to a conceptual proposal released Wednesday.

"This has been a six-year process. Midtown actually has always been one of the prime targets," said George Green, executive artistic director of The Modern Theater.

The project is envisioned as an anchor for the arts and would help complete efforts to revitalize Midtown, Green said.

The property, at N. 4th Street and E. Roosevelt Avenue, consists now of two retail shops separated by vacant land. Part is owned by ignite cda, the city's urban renewal agency. The rest is owned by The Housing Company, a Boise-based nonprofit developer of affordable housing.

"This is just basically to plant the seed with the board on an idea in Midtown for this theater," said Tony Berns, executive director of ignite cda.

Two years ago, The Housing Company and ignite cda proposed a different project there: a three-story building with retail space on the ground floor and two levels of workforce housing above it. But that idea was shelved after pushback from a group of Midtown neighbors who said the project was not the right fit.

"The agency and the housing company need to make a decision on what we're going to do up there, and the Midtown folks know that, so they came up with this other idea of a Modern Theater," Berns said. "They like this Midtown footprint."

Modern Theater officials and the neighborhood group presented the theater proposal Wednesday to the urban renewal board. They asked the agency to reserve the property for the next four years during an ambitious fundraising campaign, then agree to a 99-year lease, at \$100 a year, starting in 2021.

The fundraising potential outlined in the proposal includes \$2.5 million in private donations, over \$3 million in naming rights, \$1.5 million in grants and \$1 million from selling “walk of fame” stars on the grounds.

Through ticket sales, rental of the commercial space and other revenue, Modern officials project annual income of \$940,000 to \$1.4 million at the new theater.

The proposal also outlines several parking proposals, ranging from 80 spots to 140.

“This has been a longterm process to find the right piece of property and the right time to say, look, what else is going to go here that would be a strong fit,” Green said.

The idea is to use the project to inspire an arts district in the neighborhood north of downtown. Green points to other cities - Austin, Texas, and Charlotte, North Carolina, Seattle - that have accomplished similar redevelopment.

“And the next thing you know you’ve got dance studios, you’ve got more art galleries going in,” he said. “And you start pulling downtown up that way as well. ... It will have people going back and forth between restaurants, lounges, coffee shops, art galleries.”

The city and the urban renewal agency have invested million of dollars in Midtown in recent years, including street and sidewalk improvements along Fourth Street. Ignite cda has invested \$2.48 million on planning, property acquisition and capital improvements in Midtown.

The area has seen steady growth in retail activity and nightlife. It’s also known for a cluster of thrift stores and antique shops.

“We have to commend the city and ignite already for paving the way for something like this to happen,” Green said. “They’ve essentially written the book and said, how do we end this chapter? And we’ve written the ending for them; we hope they approve of it.”

Berns said, “The board will listen and take it under advisement, and kind of see how or if it might fit into the future.”

“I think it would be a very interested element in Coeur d’Alene,” he added. “I’m not sure how it works financially yet. We need to learn about that.”

Formerly the Lake City Playhouse, The Modern Theater rebranded in November 2014 after acquiring Interplayers Professional Theatre in Spokane. The Modern operates theaters in both Spokane and Coeur d’Alene. The latter seats 160 in a former church at 1320 E. Garden Ave., with seven productions staged there this season.

The Modern could sell the Garden Avenue theater to help fund the new building, but that wouldn’t be the first choice, Green said.

“The prime option is to turn that venue into a children’s academy,” he said. “We would focus our academic opportunities in that space, and it could be exclusive to that.”

Another option would be to clear the land and build a storage and rehearsal space on that property, he said.

“That way we would have an alternate space to be rehearsing in while we’re so production heavy,” Green said. “But there are many alternatives for that option.”