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Group wants to renovate Nomar theatre

BY CHRISTINA M. WOODS
The Wichita Eagle

The city of Wichita has used the Nomar name for several years to market redevelopment near 21st and Broadway while the building that carried the name served as furniture storage.

Now, a private group of Wichitans has filed for nonprofit status, hired an architect and started the process of restoring the NoMar Theatre at 2141 N. Market to its former glory as a film house and community gathering place.

"The theater itself is absolutely beautiful and deserves to be restored," said Pam Bugler, who serves as chairwoman for the newly formed 15-member board and who is the development director for the theater. "The area is amazing."

Bugler, who has lived in Wichita for 15 years after working for a real estate investment trust in Dallas, said it could cost an estimated \$2.5 million to renovate the theater.

The project's price tag doesn't include the cost of the building, which is under negotiations, Bugler said.

The group plans to officially launch a fundraising campaign once it has received all the documentation needed to allow donations to be tax deductible.

Paul Cavanaugh, who owns Places Architects, said the theater building is structurally sound.

"It's in much better shape than most theaters I've seen and tried to renovate," said Cavanaugh, whose company went through the building about two months ago taking inventory. "Much of the original fabric is still there. The colors, the details and architectural elements are still there.

"We're very excited about the possibilities of bringing it back close to the way it was."

Cavanaugh said the company has preliminary design plans and will determine more construction details as the group raises money.

"These things are treasures in communities and need to be restored, and kept and used," he said of old theaters.

Places Architects is also renovating the Anthony Theatre in Harper County.

Another group in Wichita, Power Community Development Corp., is trying to renovate the Dunbar Theatre near Ninth and Cleveland Streets.

Renovation plans

Standing in the midst of scattered debris stored in the building-- chairs, piles of white cardboard boxes and old mattresses -- Bugler described the films the theater would again show, the meeting spaces and the concert music that would float through the space.

She acknowledged that the recession might make it hard to raise money, but said "some of the strongest entrepreneurs made their way when the economy was bad. It's a great time for people to blaze trails and prove to themselves some things can be done in a tough time."

Renovation plans include restoring the lobby to its original condition and re-using some of the theater's original chairs, which are now housed in the basement, Bugler said.

The restored theater would have about 450 seats, down from 800 when it opened in 1929.

Bugler's vision is infectious, particularly to the people who have worked with the city for nearly five years developing the Nomar International Public Market, touted as a destination featuring custom goods and live entertainment.

The design plans for the market, scaled back from a planned 26,000 square feet to 1,600 square feet, are close to completion, officials with the project have said.

Ron Cruz, president of the 21st Street Business Association, has been supportive, but critical of the slow pace of the city's revitalization efforts. But the NoMar theater renovation has him remembering Saturday mornings watching movies at the theater during the mid-1950s to 1960s.

"I think it probably should have been the project from the beginning," Cruz said. "If it succeeds, it's going to have a heck of an impact."

Cruz said he's "fully behind Bugler" and is particularly impressed with her enthusiasm and the group she's assembled for the board. Several members have connections with the arts, Cruz and Bugler said.

"This group is so optimistic, and I like that," Cruz said.

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