

Clock is running for Pearl River Theater

Progress toward restoring and reopening the Pearl River Theater are encouraging. Faced by the looming wreckers' ball, the theater may indeed enjoy a Hollywood ending.

And the benefits would be widespread. An active movie theater serves as an anchor in a central business district, bringing a changing crowd of people at various times of the day and night.

A 24-hour drugstore or a variety store can also serve as an anchor, but nothing draws traffic and lights up a business district like a theater.

Suffern treasures its Lafayette Theater and with good reason, even though few attractions fill all 1,000 seats. Still, the owner, Nelson Paige, refuses to desecrate its Art-Deco interior by cutting the house into a multiplex. Instead, he has restored the interior.

Teaneck also has a theater, as does Westwood. Each brings traffic downtown. Ramapo renovated a long-dark former porn house on Main Street in Spring Valley, spending \$650,000 to buy the property and \$800,000 on the renovation project. Ramsey, NJ supports a duplex theater, family friendly and family-priced.

Orangetown seems interested in organizing various groups and interests to preserve the Pearl River Theater. Various children's theater groups are interested. Also interested is Clearview Cinema, owned by your favorite cable company, which operates multiplexes in New City, Washington Township, NJ, Emerson, NJ, Greenburgh NY and other locations.

The project is not without its challenges. An estimated \$1.5 million would be required to purchase the building, exclusive of the cost of refurbishing and re-equipping the theater for any use. A movie exhibitor would have to invest in projection and sound equipment. Lighting and stage rigging would be required for theater production – a \$30,000-\$50,000 investment at the least.

The building would have to meet current building, fire and safety codes, and of course, there is the issue of handicapped accessibility.

Among the other challenges to the project are ownership and taxation. The ideal form of ownership for operation as a community performing arts center would be through a non-profit, tax-exempt organization. Hopefully the loss of property tax revenue would be offset by a boost in commercial real estate values in Pearl River.

If a movie exhibitor runs the theater, profitability is in doubt if the house remains with a single screen. The economics of the movie business are such that a duplex, at the very least, would have a chance to be profitable.

And if the house is cut up and used for movies exclusively, the children's theater groups and other performing groups would be unable to use it for live shows.

But interest in the theater is running high. More people are coming forward with ideas for saving and using it. The deadline for coming up with a workable plan has been extended to mid-February. Various groups have also offered financial commitments, so there interest is more than talk.

The key elements to saving the theater seem to be in place: Town interest and involvement; the willingness of the Chamber of Commerce to participate; the willingness of knowledgeable professionals to become involved and deem the project feasible.

We believe the Pearl River Theater is a gem, a community asset and an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity at downtown revitalization. But the clock is running. Whether all the elements come together on time will determine whether we smile at a Hollywood ending or witness the destruction of the last picture show.