

The Argus

By Susan Gordanier

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Theater's neon caught in own protective web

Hillsboro just might love its Town Theater too much.

Less than a week passed since the ink dried on Denzil Scheller's purchase of the property and the adjacent retail space currently housing Faro's clothing store before the theater was back as an agenda item before the City Council

This time the issue was the marquee.

Scheller wants to remove the dilapidated marquee that extends over the sidewalk from the building's front and replace it with a new, yet retro, neon sign in keeping with his plans to remodel the spaces in the spirit of The Venetian, the theater which preceded The Town at the same site.

The city had owned the theater since 1996 and long sought a developer to restore it as a key piece of the economic development of the downtown core.

The problem stems from another long-term city project: the sign code, section 15.20 of the Buildings and Construction segment of the Municipal Code. It was adopted in September 2006, after a process stretching back 20 years.

One subsection of this code was specifically written to protect the Town

Theater, said Debbie Raber, who as Planning Department project manager shepherded the sign code through its final year of debate and revision.

The city had hoped to sell The Town to someone who would preserve its features and character. Hence the code included specific requirements for theater marquees, with language patterned on the design of the Town's existing structure: "One single-faced bulletin board, or one double-faced bulletin board constructed so that the two faces connect at one end with an angle of forty-five degrees or more, may be incorporated into a theater marquee."

Now in order to replace the marquee, which Scheller described in a letter to the council as "not currently functional" and "beyond repair," he must request an amendment of the Municipal Code itself, not merely seek a variance from the Planning Department.

To do so requires adoption of an ordinance, and that, in turn, requires a public hearing. That hearing has been scheduled for the Sept. 18 session of the Hillsboro City Council.

Anyone interested in testifying before the council on this issue should attend. Council meetings begin at 7 p.m. in the Civic Center Auditorium, 150 E. Main St.

