

Portland Business Journal

Town Theater rehab: Labor of love for Hillsboro native

Contractor buys site for \$10,
begins quest to build the
once-and-future Venetian

BY WENDY CULVERWELL
BUSINESS JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Transforming a derelict movie theater into a lovely downtown gathering spot may well take all of Denzil Scheller's contracting expertise.

Having started working in August, the lifelong Hillsboro resident intends to reopen the former Town Theater in June 2008 as the Venetian, a fun movie theater with wine bar, coffee bar, restaurant and live theater.

It's an ambitious goal for the Town Theater, an asbestos-laden building that's gone unused for more than a decade.

Scheller had to think hard to even come up with one good thing to say about the old theater:

It needed to seismic update and was far from accessible to people with disabilities. The restrooms were upstairs and even if a wheelchair user were able to reach them, they aren't wide enough to allow them to maneuver. In the auditorium itself, seats were moldy and narrow. The ancient projector room contained equally ancient projectors.

But Scheller remembers the theater in its glory days, before a fire destroyed what was the Venetian Theater and a ho-hum rebuild remade it into the Town. Scheller was a youngster when the fire happened, but he knows it is a local institution worth restoring.

The first part of the work was removing hazardous materials, and that set the stage for a massive makeover.

The \$2.35 million project includes \$750,000 from the city for seismic updates and to remove the hazardous asbestos used throughout the

structure. Scheller, a real estate investor and building contractor, paid a nominal \$10 to acquire the property from the city of Hillsboro, a figure that reflects the difficulty of the renovations.

John Southgate, Hillsboro's economic development manager, said there's been little criticism of the exceedingly low price.

"Everyone's really excited that we're going to bring this old building back to life," he said.

"Anyone who has been through it wouldn't argue that it isn't in pretty seriously bad shape."

The city has owned the theater since 1996, when it was paid Moyer Theaters Inc. \$1,500 for the property. That's about the time it shut down.

The remodel stripped the badly deteriorated theater to its bones and started afresh with new mechanical systems, ramps and layout, it name a few items.

The theater dates to 1913, when a celebrated theater builder Orange Phelps first opened a 200-seat movie house called the Grand Theater. It became the Liberty Theater in 1916 and 10 years later, was converted to the Venetian, showing first-run American movies, according to a history completed six years ago.

Southgate jokes that even at \$1,500, the city probably paid too much for a ragged building with just 20 feet or so of street frontage.

But like Scheller, city leaders sensed it could be something special and elected to bank it for the future. In one study, conducted around 2001, an observer noted that although the building isn't a historical structure, "the activities that took place within are."

Spurred by public inquiries, the city eventually invited developers to suggest ideas. It was chose native son Scheller to carry out the restoration.

A one-time general contractor who owns and manages commercial real estate in town, Scheller keeps offices in Hillsboro's old Carnegie Library building, which is less than a block from the theater.

In the course of a brief downtown stroll just before the restoration work began, Scheller was peppered with friendly questions from passerby who recognized him. Someone should reopen that theater, they counseled.

Scheller said that's been a common occurrence since the restoration was announced. At once point, two elderly women approached to reminisce about their days working as ushers and ticket takers.

The new Venetian will echo the palace it once was, but in a nod to modern tastes, it will accommodate dining as well as theater-going.

The 745-seat auditorium will shrink to about 400 seats, making way for bistro and coffee and wine bar that are the staples of any entertainment-themed venue these days.

Scheller said every fourth row will be replaced by tables to allow patrons to dine while watching second-run movies or special showings.

Scheller said he was drawn to the project by sheer force of familiarity. He was constantly walking past the “old dog” and wanted to see something interesting happen there. About five years ago, he investigated what it would take to remake the Town Theater into an office building.

But the city was set on energizing Hillsboro after hours. In consultation with theater experts, it acquired a neighboring building Music Village, to flesh out the space and give room for a restaurant.

Together, the buildings provided the redevelopment team with a little more than 16,000 square feet to work with.

Saxony Peterson, a 12-year Hillsboro resident and owner of Planet Bead, is teaming with Scheller to run the restaurant. A former baker, she said Hillsboro needs something to enliven its downtown at night.

“There is a need. There isn’t much going on here after 5,” she said, echoing Southgate.

As it happens, her bead business stays open until 6p.m., but she’s hopeful the theater will attract enough evening visitors to turn downtown Hillsboro around.

“I would love to keep [Planet Bead] open later,” she said.