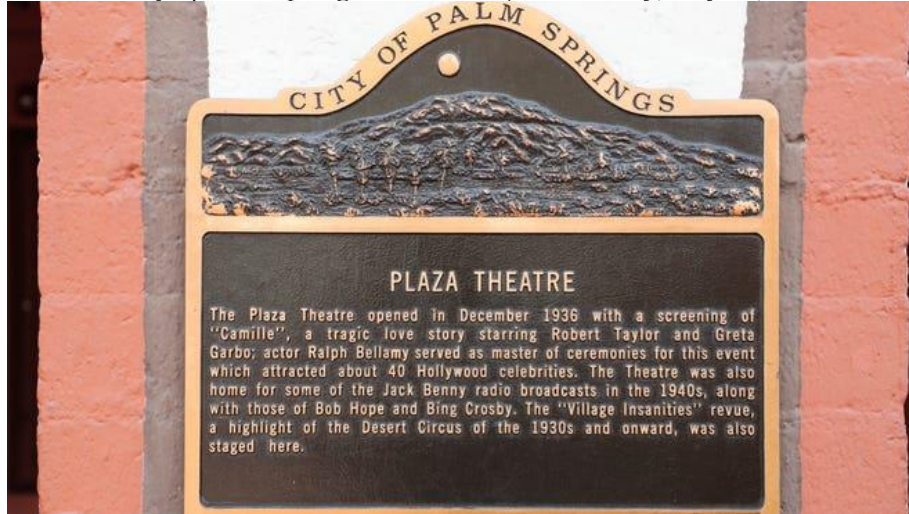


Plaza Theatre: As city considers \$50,000 in repairs, film fest chair offers \$1.6M to lease historic space

Brian Blueskye | Palm Springs Desert Sun | Wednesday, July 21, 2021



As Palm Springs reconsiders its commitment to the maintenance and restoration of the historic Plaza Theatre, Palm Springs International Film Festival chairman Harold Matzner has stepped in with an offer to lease the downtown building for the next 25 years.

Matzner says he has told city officials he is willing to pay \$1.6 million for use of the space —which is owned by the city— for the film festival, and charity and other events.

"We want this building functioning," Matzner said.

J.R. Roberts, former council member and Plaza Theatre Restoration Steering Committee Chairperson, said Matzner has made offers to contribute and take over the theater in the past through a lease.

"The question is does the city want to give up the use of the theater to a lease holder? Maybe they do and that's the right choice," Roberts said.

Palm Springs City Manager Justin Clifton said he's attempting to schedule a meeting with Matzner ahead of Thursday's council meeting to "better understand what he's proposing."

At that meeting, the council is expected to discuss making a \$50,000 investment toward theater updates and repairs.



The campaign Save the Plaza Theatre initially raised almost \$500,000 in cash and pledge promises toward a goal of \$10 to \$12 million for full restoration before the coronavirus pandemic, according to Roberts.

But fundraising efforts were thwarted by the impact of COVID-19.

Modernism Week retracted a donation of \$100,000 and the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation rescinded \$50,000.

Save the Plaza Theatre currently has just over \$160,000.

Modernism Week Executive Director Lisa Vossler Smith said in an email to The Desert Sun after the project was halted at the beginning of the pandemic that her organization requested its pledge be returned. She added the funds were "critical in helping us stay afloat" amid COVID-19 and still plans to complete their pledge of \$100,000 when the project resumes.

In a December letter addressed to former Palm Springs City Manager David Ready, the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation also asked for its donation to be returned after fundraising efforts were halted.

“We still view the theater as vitally important to the community and will revisit this matter should the city’s future efforts indicate a viable commitment to the theatre’s restoration,” the letter said.

Gary Johns, president of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation, told The Desert Sun, "We still see it as a vitally important part of the community and want to see it restored as much as anyone."

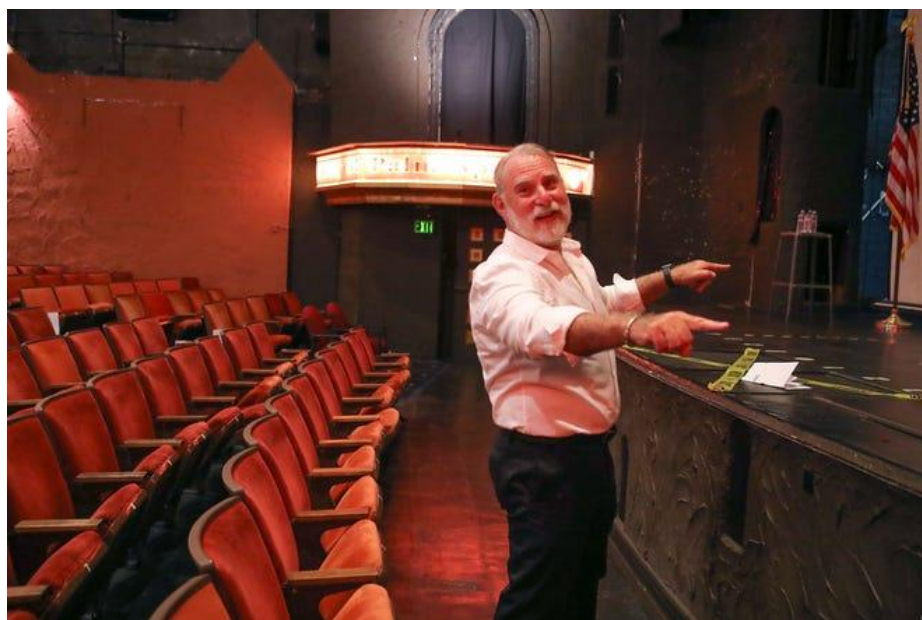
Request for \$50,000 for theater maintenance

Now that public health orders are lifting, allowing for entertainment venues to operate, the committee is hoping to get back on track.

In July, Roberts submitted the "Restoration and Operations Proposal" to the council, which included plans for an event called Oasis Music Festival organized by Palm Springs Life, suggesting the \$50,000 investment from the city.

Roberts told The Desert Sun the investment wouldn't go toward the restoration but to maintain the theater in its current condition.

"Some of it is cosmetic stuff and some is just extra dollars we might need down the road if we get back into the fundraising mode," Roberts said.



Immediate maintenance items ahead of the proposed festival include ensuring lighting is functional; heating and air conditioning; cleaning lobby carpets;

repairing damage to doors, walls and flooring; deep cleaning of restrooms and other miscellaneous items.

Restoration plans inside the theater include installing new carpet and seating, increasing spacing between rows, adding ADA seating locations and repairing the side walls to the original design as well as the ceiling.

The plans also extend to the lobby with needs such as maintaining the Saltillo tile, restoring the chandeliers, a new bar and offices, carpeting and updating the restrooms. The stage also requires restoration and the recreation of a small orchestra pit.



Matzner told The Desert Sun his lease offer could accommodate the plans for the music festival, and other possible partnerships.

Roberts said "there's so many opportunities" and sees it being used often.

"When I left the city council to start fundraising for restoration, the idea was it would be a community venue," Roberts said. "Who knows what the future will hold? I don't know if that's changed at all but I think given the pandemic and everything that's happened, the city needs to reconfirm what it wants to do."



A rich history in Palm Springs

The Plaza Theatre was designed by Harry Williams, the father of E. Stewart Williams. It was built in 1936 and had 800 seats. It opened with the premiere of the movie “Camille” and hosted screenings and broadcast radio programs featuring celebrities like Jack Benny, Bob Hope, Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra.

The theater has remained in solid shape. The stage is structurally sound. The walls, though worn, are about 90% original. The lobby still boasts original red, green and gold stenciling on overhead beams and ornate lanterns that cast a soothing yellow glow.

It was established as a Class I Historic Site by the Palm Springs City Council in 1991 and hosted the first Palm Springs International Film Festival under the direction of then-Mayor Sonny Bono. It was also home to the Fabulous Palm Springs Follies, a dance and musical-review show with performers 55 and older, for 22 years before its curtain call in 2014.



In 2015, the theater was sold to the city on the conditions that it would not be demolished and they would assume financial responsibility for maintenance and renovations. In 2017, a plan for reuse and restoration came from Suzanne Somers, who offered \$1 million to lease the theater.

The theater saw its first event in six years in 2019 when the committee* hosted Nancy Sinatra, her daughters A.J. Lambert and Amanda Erlinger, Roberts, actor and singer James Darren and Wrecking Crew member Don Randi in a fundraiser to restore the Plaza. In a surprise twist, Sinatra walked out on stage and performed "Bang Bang" as well as her 1966 hit "Boots" for the show's finale.

Previous reporting by Desert Sun staff writer Melissa Daniels was used for this report.

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**The host of the Nancy Sinatra event has been clarified.*