

Pittsburg approves contract to renovate landmark theater

By Rick Radin

Contra Costa Times

Posted: 06/12/2011 12:00:00 AM PDT



PITTSBURG -- The city is going full speed ahead on restoring the 91-year-old California Theater, converting the long-closed Beaux Arts building into a community playhouse that it hopes will lure more people to its redeveloped downtown.

Last month, the City Council directed \$1.6 million in redevelopment money left from completed projects toward the expected \$5.8 million restoration cost.

Workers have stripped the theater space and lobby to the walls, cleaned up mold and bat guano, and installed a \$42,000 replica of the original 1920 marquee over the entrance.

The city hopes to complete the project in about a year, making it look close to what historical photos of the interior show, said assistant city manager Joe Sbranti.

"This project didn't have its full funding, and we directed savings from other projects to it," Sbranti said. "This is a good time to do construction, because generally prices are down."

The theater opened in May 1920 and showed movies continuously until closing in 1954. The city's redevelopment agency purchased the building in 1971, but it remained boarded up until 1998 when preliminary cleanup efforts began, according to senior civil engineer Dick Abono, a fifth-generation Pittsburg resident.

The marquee was removed in 1975, but what happened to the seats and other fittings is unclear, Abono said.

"There was no work done to it at all after it closed," he said. "There were so many roof leaks that probably destroyed the seats."

Architect Albert Cornelius designed the structure. Cornelius also designed the California Theater, near the UC Berkeley campus, the Elmwood Theater in Berkeley and the City Market on Park Street in Alameda, all of which are still in use.

A handful of other Cornelius-designed movie houses in Richmond, Oakland, Berkeley and Modesto have been demolished or converted to other uses.

The city plans to restore the original chandelier and organ and re-create the pattern of the original ceiling, Abono said. Pittsburg City Manager Marc Grisham located the organ at a winery in the Central Valley. It was used as a church organ in parishes in Oakland and Castro Valley after it was removed from the theater, Abono said.

"The winery never used it, and it was still in the box it was shipped in," he said.

The restored theater will have about 375 seats on the main floor and in the balcony.

San Francisco-based Architectural Resources Group, which also restored the Napa Opera House, is carrying out the project.

The theater has more than 2,000 square feet of retail space on either side of the entrance, which the city will try to lease, as well as three smaller offices upstairs behind a pair of statues on the facade.

"I know people who remember going to movies here," Abono said. "We need to get this done so they can see it again as it was. That's our goal."

Contact Rick Radin at 925-779-7166.