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Rochester historical group considers restoring 1941 theater

Wednesday, June 12, 2013 2:01 AM EDT

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It's been almost two decades since downtown Rochester had an operating movie theater, but a former cinematic mainstay could be resurrected if a plan by the Rochester-Avon Historical Society comes to fruition.

City Council on Monday approved a request from the Rochester Historical Commission to float a \$15,000 grant to the Historical Society to produce a feasibility study for renovation work on the former Hills Theatre site downtown at 412-416 S. Main St.

The organization had been working for months looking into the background of the project, said City Manager Jaymes Vettrano.

"They want to do a formal look at it," he said.

Vettrano said the council requires the future business plan and study be provided to the city for review.

The theater was initially constructed in 1941 and marked its grand opening a year later. After more theaters sprung up around town, the Hills went dark in 1984 after succumbing to financial instability.

Plans are to restore the old facade and convert the 820-seat theater into one with half as many seats that are larger and more comfortable, said Rod Wilson of the Historical Society.

Wilson said in surveys asking what residents would like to see downtown, most typically noted a theater as their first or second response.

Wilson said that in conversations with residents and during downtown walking tours he conducts, for years people have asked, "Why don't we put a theater in the old theater building?"

Restaurant and retail owners downtown are clamoring for more traffic, Wilson said. "This should give them the opportunity."

The "mini-mall" conversion of the site that now includes numerous businesses was done with "little concrete," Wilson said after talking with the developer that remodeled the building once the theater closed.

"He said you can basically just pull that all out and have an empty theater shell," he said.

And with a gutted space, Wilson said he'd like to see the theater with larger seats and a bigger stage than what was originally in place.

"It could be used as a community auditorium," he said. "There's just countless things it could be used for."

Wilson said it wouldn't compete with Hollywood-centric film houses and would focus on showing documentaries, older films and lesser-known contemporary works. He'd also like to see a second 100-seat theater be constructed on a second floor.

"It's a valuable project," he said.

Wilson said the Historical Society hopes to sign a contract with someone to construct a business plan and an architectural firm by June, with a plan to be completed by August.

"Once we have that in hand, and it looks promising ... we'll start fundraising in earnest," he said.

Vettraino said: "It really is an icon of our downtown."

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