

## Rochester

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# Historical Society considers restoring former Hills Theatre

By **Mary Beth Almond**  
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ROCHESTER — Rochester-Avon Historical Society member Rod Wilson hopes the historic Hills Theatre in downtown Rochester, at 412-416 S. Main St., will one day reopen its doors.

The Hills Theatre — which drew its name from Rochester's slogan, "The Heart of the Hills" — was built in 1941 by the proprietor of the Avon Theatre, Charles L. Sterns. The theater officially opened to the public in 1942 and went dark in 1984 after failing to compete with the many other theaters that had popped up in town in the 1970s. The building was later remodeled as the Main Street Plaza, housing a group of boutique businesses and professional offices.

Today, when Wilson looks at the former Hills Theatre building, he sees endless possibilities. And he isn't alone.

Over the last 18 months, Wilson — along with a host of others on the Rochester-Avon Historical Society and the Rochester Historical Commission — has been exploring the idea of restoring and reopening the old 820-seat historic theater with its original name, the Hills Theatre.

"If we do a historic restoration, we want to put back the lights and everything out front with the Hills right on it because that would make it historic. If we name it something else, it would lose some meaning in the community. I say Rochester, you are the heart of the hills, any way you look at it," he said.



Photo provided by the Rochester-Avon Historical Society

**The Rochester Avon Historical Society is looking into restoring and reopening the Hills Theatre, shown here in 1961.**

Current plans call for half as many seats — to allow for larger, more comfortable options — a bigger stage, and a second, 100-seat theater on the second floor.

“We’re looking at (showing) documentaries, old films and old newsreels. We’re making the stage larger. It used to be a small stage, just for a screen. We’re going to make a larger stage so we can do large performances of music and theater. The auditorium could be used for companies for business meetings, having a community auditorium. We might have some dance recitals there. It just opens it wide open,” Wilson said.

But before the plan can come to fruition, society members want to make sure it’s feasible and makes good business sense — an idea that the City Council recently endorsed.

On June 10, the City Council unanimously approved the reallocation of \$15,000 of the city’s Historical Commission capital project budget to be issued in the form of a grant to the Rochester-Avon Historical Society to pay for a business plan and feasibility study, with input from an architect, for the restoration work.

“I used to work above the Birmingham theater, so I am very familiar with the restoration that went into that facility and how neat that turned out, and I always vowed that if I ever won the lottery ... I would take money and do exactly what you are trying to do with that space because I think we need to have a theater downtown,” Councilmember Ben Giovanelli said during the meeting.

Mayor Pro Tem Jeffrey Cuthbertson said he believes the study is “a very logical and entirely reasonable” place for organizers to start.

“I believe this is an appropriate way for the city to be engaged in what really is a community effort. I entirely support that,” he said.

Reverting space back to a theater shouldn’t be too difficult, according to Wilson, who said the developer who converted the theater into the plaza said the work was done with “a lot of wood and some sand” and barely any concrete.

“Basically, you go in and you just pull it out,” Wilson explained.

As for ownership, Wilson said the society hopes to purchase the building, rather than lease it.

“If the business plan and feasibility study comes back like we think it’s going to come back — like this is a no-brainer kind of a thing — then it’s going to take awhile to raise the money to buy the location,” he said. “There are grants available to help you buy, but there are more grants available for the restoration, and most places will not allow you a grant for restoration unless you own the building, so you have to get the money to buy the building and then raise the money for the restoration.”

If the group is able to raise enough money to purchase the building, Wilson said the society would eventually develop a separate 501c3 to serve as the management group that handles the theater. The group would hire a theater director and an assistant director, as well as a

projectionist and an assistant projectionist, and would likely rely on volunteers to man most of the other positions, Wilson said. One idea society members have tossed around is to have different organizations man the theater on different days of the week, he explained.

The group has also talked to the city about helping them relocate the building's current tenants, if they are able to secure ownership, Wilson added.

"We don't want to harm anybody," he said.

Once completed, the business plan and feasibility study will be provided to the City Council for review.

"In late summer and early fall, we should be back with some information and to pay for a consultant," Wilson said.

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