

A NEW DOWNTOWN THEATER FOR LOS ALTOS

GOALS

- To increase the vibrancy of Los Altos' downtown business district by building a performing arts venue that will present cultural activities and programs

- To utilize Los Altos' existing and longstanding community-based theater arts and youth theater education programs to provide programming and management for the venue

- To increase the local cultural participation of and engagement by Los Altos residents by expanding education and community access opportunities in the new venue

- To attract residents of surrounding communities to Los Altos' downtown business district for expanded and varied nighttime programs.

THEATER PROGRAMMING

- Theatrical performances of plays and musicals
- Youth theater family productions
- Performing arts classes for youth and adults
- Film series programming
- Lectures and public programs
- Community access and rental programs

BACKGROUND

A 16-person group of residents was tasked by the City Council with developing a proposal for placing a 125-to-180-seat community theater in downtown Los Altos. This action was recommended by the 2018 Downtown Vision adopted by the City Council; the Vision specifies placing this theater on a city-owned parking plaza. (Refer to the City Council minutes of 3-23-21 for details.)

The Working Group supports this new theater becoming the home of the Los Altos Youth Theater (a city project operated by Los Altos Stage) and Los Altos Stage Company. It would be managed by Los Altos Stage Company and constructed in a way to make it available as often as possible for films, lectures, rentals, and other community uses.

The current Bus Barn Theater on the Civic Center campus is poorly placed, old and in need of major additions (lobby, restrooms, offices) and renovations/demolition/rebuilding. The building was placed on the current City property back in the 1940's when the property was owned by the Los Altos School District; it was used as a school bus barn. It was converted to a theater by a group of private citizens in 1976, with City permission. In 1993, the City purchased the property of the Los Altos Conservatory Theatre (L'ACT) which included costumes, props, and the interior of the theater (lighting, stage, seats, dressing rooms). This action retired the debt of L'ACT and provided an opportunity for a new theater

DISCUSSION ITEM
Agenda Item #8
City Council Meeting: November 9, 2021

company to occupy the building: Bus Barn Stage Company, now doing business (successfully) as Los Altos Stage Company. For its 27-years of existence, LASC has remained solvent, and this year received a Small Business Association grant plus two PPP loans which were converted to grants.

The Los Altos Youth Theater has provided classes and productions for the community for over 45 years. Approximately 125 children ages 6-18 participate in LAYT each year. Los Altos Stage Company presents 5 quality productions each year to the greater Los Altos Community and employs 100 actors, technicians, directors and serves over 10,000 patrons yearly.

OPPORTUNITY SITES AND PROPOSALS FROM THE DOWNTOWN VISION

“Early on in the visioning process, the existing parking plazas were identified as opportunity sites that could accommodate new development within Downtown. These opportunity sites have the potential to be the catalysts for enhancing the overall economic vitality and vibrancy of Downtown. The City is well-positioned to help spur reinvestment and attract key uses to the Downtown by utilizing these city owned parking plazas.” (Downtown Vision p. 26)

The Downtown Vision, adopted in 2018 by the City Council, cites *the economic advantages of a live theater bringing vitality to Los Altos, especially in the evenings* which will lead to more patrons choosing to park once, then dine and shop downtown. The New Theater Working Group also proposes *creating an outdoor plaza adjacent to the theater* for the community’s use.

The Downtown Vision recommends locating the theater on the City’s parking plaza behind Main Street, the plaza closest to Walgreens, between 2nd and 3rd Streets (location #12 on the Downtown Vision map, page 3). They suggest an alternative location as the parking plaza next to Los Altos Grill, between 3rd Street and San Antonio Road.

WHAT IS THE ASK OF THE CITY?

The City would provide a MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) which includes a lease of the land to the non-profit (Los Altos Stage Company) managing this new building for mutually agreed number of years at a mutually agreed minimal rate.

Once Council approves the MOU, it will be necessary for a team of experts to take this project to the next stage: a feasibility study that includes architectural drawings and estimates, and capital campaign consultants to create a fund-raising plan. We anticipate costs of such a study to be \$150,000-200,000 and *request that the City contribute one-fourth of these costs, approximately \$50,000. Some of these costs could be in-kind staff time for the City to undertake the engineering feasibility portion of the study. The remaining funds will be raised through grants and donations.*

We request that the council act on this proposal at their November 23, 2021, council meeting.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

The Vision further suggests the construction of a parking structure (or underground parking) adjoining a potential condo/apartment complex on the 2nd Street end of this plaza. Senior housing in this location would be an ideal complement to the theater project.

It would be feasible to create one large construction project overseen by one developer, with different design teams for each project, but one mutual goal of completely revitalizing an entire plaza. It is the desire of the Theater Working Group to raise private funds for the design and construction of the new theater. Housing advocates or developers would be needed to create a housing plan for this plaza.

The map identifies structure #12 as the best site for a new theater.

DISCUSSION ITEM
Agenda Item #8
City Council Meeting: November 9, 2021



According to Bill Lee, Econ Land Group*, the Downtown Vision estimates that increasing the seating capacity in a new theater from 100 to 190 will have the net effect of:

--70% of attendees patronizing downtown vs. 50% at the existing theater.

--An increase in attendance from 10,800 to 30,000.

--A theater patron sales impact *increase to \$1,170,400* from the current estimate of \$270,000.

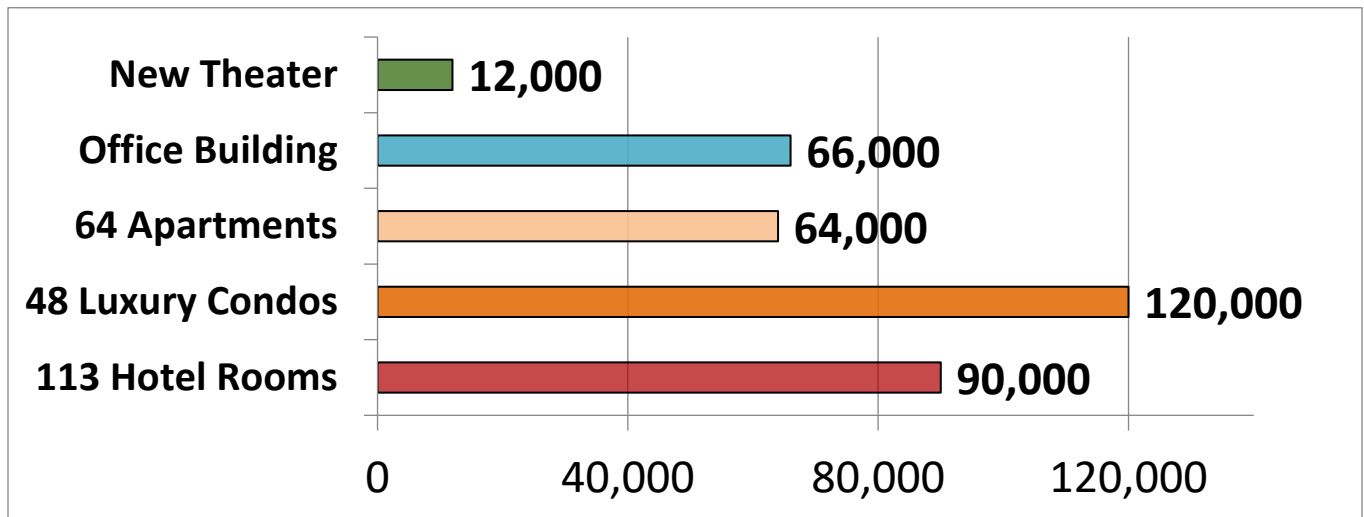
--A 10% increase in downtown sales from performers and staff

Creating a Gain in Downtown Sales Due to New Theater Patrons/Performers/Staff of \$990,440

**Data from the 2018 Downtown Vision Appendix.*

From Downtown Vision Consultant Bill Lee:

Estimated Amount of Building SF Needed to Add One Million Dollars in Downtown Sales:



WHY IS IT CHALLENGING FOR A THEATER TO BE FLEXIBLE AND MULTI-USE?

Theater spaces—auditoriums, rehearsal rooms, etc., --are “in use” many days and nights even when there are no performances scheduled. Time is required to load in and build each set and then time is required for the cast to rehearse on the set. Meanwhile, in the rehearsal room, another cast is working on the next play. Striking (tearing down) a set also involves a significant block of time. All these issues can be mitigated by adding moveable walls in front of the stage, making meeting spaces acoustically separated, designing a larger lobby area to use as an additional meeting space. These innovations will add some cost to the project but also add to its capacity for multiple uses.

PARKING SOLUTIONS PROPOSED BY DOWNTOWN VISION

“In contrast to Los Altos’ goal of providing convenient parking everywhere, many smaller cities that have vibrant downtowns *promote a philosophy of parking once and visiting multiple destinations by walking*. For example, a person who visits an office, a bank, a coffee shop, a drug store and a restaurant in a small downtown needs only one parking space rather than the four or five in accordance with suburban style requirements. *In mixed-use downtowns, where*

DISCUSSION ITEM
Agenda Item #8
City Council Meeting: November 9, 2021

many short trips are shifted from driving to walking, the district-wide parking demand is greatly reduced.

- Overhaul Downtown Parking Requirements
Los Altos can learn from downtowns with the level of pedestrian vitality desired such as Burlingame, Los Gatos, San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara.
Suggest 2.0 to 2.5 parking spaces per 1,000 square feet of office, retail, restaurant, or personal service use. The single standard facilitates re-leasing of vacant space to maintain vitality. Eliminating per employee requirements removes the development cost penalty for higher service restaurants.
- Suggest 0.8 to 1.0 parking spaces per hotel room. Employees can purchase annual permits at nominal cost. Eliminating employee requirements removes the development cost penalty for higher quality and higher service hotels.
- Institute a Parking In-Lieu Fee at \$25,000 to \$30,000 per space. The In-lieu Fees allows smaller properties to develop or redevelop. The money collected would accumulate in a Downtown Parking Fund and be used later to construct addition parking in or near the downtown as such parking is needed.
- As parking demand grows in the downtown core, use permits, pricing, and enforcement to shift employee parking to the areas less convenient for shoppers and restaurant patrons.”

“Downtown Vision Conclusion: Move Forward with New Downtown Theater

Relative to the amount of new building mass added the proposed new theater has very strong sales impact on restaurants in the downtown.

- Since a large majority of its patronage is in the evenings or on weekends, when parking downtown is not constrained, ***we suggest that the parking requirements for the new theater be waived.*** *Having theater patrons park throughout the downtown has a greater impact on pedestrian vitality than having them drive in and out of a dedicated parking garage.*
- Proceed with detailed feasibility study if needed. *It is common for municipal performing arts centers to require an annual operating subsidy to help cover maintenance and utilities.* This issue should be addressed in the feasibility study.
- Initiate a fund-raising campaign. Given the affluence of the community, we expect the entire project development cost to be covered by private donations raised through a well-conceived fund raising campaign.”

OUTREACH BY THE NEW THEATER WORKING GROUP:

Members of the Working Group met with representatives of:

DISCUSSION ITEM
Agenda Item #8
City Council Meeting: November 9, 2021

Arts Los Altos
Elevation Architects
Friends of Los Altos
Land Econ Group
Los Altos Affordable Housing Alliance
Los Altos Arts Commission
Los Altos Chamber of Commerce Governmental Affairs
Los Altos City Council Members and City Manager
Los Altos Financial Commission
Los Altos Mountain View Community Foundation
Los Altos Community Investments
Los Altos Community Voices
Los Altos Property Owners Downtown
Los Altos History Museum
Los Altos Library Commission
Los Altos School District
Los Altos Village Association
Los Altos Women's Caucus
Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts
Menlo-Atherton Performing Arts Theater
RRM Consultants
San Luis Obispo Repertory Theater

MEMBERS OF THE NEW THEATER WORKING GROUP:

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Michele Kirsch, Sandesh Mouli, Kavita Nayar, Mark Rogge
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