

New Life For An Old Treasure Signals Even Brighter Days For Downtown

Recently, I have heard rumblings that after the final curtain goes down on the talent show scheduled for the Historic Saenger Theatre in Downtown Pensacola on June 23, 2007, downtown businesses will begin losing patronage from those that attend such artistic performances. The basis of that uninformed belief lies in the fact that the grand ole landmark will be getting a much needed renovation and expansion during the next thirteen or so months. While there will likely be some disruption of normal before and after performance rituals by patrons, the overall impact should be minimal – and most importantly temporary. A mayor I use to serve with liked to describe this type of progress as “sometimes you have to go slow in order to go fast”. Over the years, I have come to realize that he was correct. I firmly believe that is what we are doing with the plans to restore and expand the Saenger.

Not counting rehearsals, our Saenger Theatre hosted 130 days of performances during 2006. All but the Pensacola Opera and the Broadway Series have found other – temporary- venues (i.e. First Baptist Church, Cultural Arts Center, Pensacola Civic Center, etc.) in or very near the downtown for the thirteen months that the landmark on Palafox will be dark. The total number of nights that these two regular users of the Saenger represent is fourteen or 11% of the total. Both the Pensacola Opera and the Broadway Series will be back home in the Saenger – with all of the other regular users- when the construction project is complete. Most of the other “temporary” venues are within walking or easy driving distance of the fine restaurants and unique stores of downtown.

Instead of dwelling on the small number of nights downtown businesses will lose for slightly more than a year, we should be crowing about the restoration of the worn and faded ornate finishes throughout the building, the new seating, the improved sound quality, the stage addition, the expansion of the orchestra pit, the new dressing rooms, the restored lobby area, the addition of accessible seating, the new restrooms, and the modern air-conditioning and heating. In short, we should be thrilled about what these improvements and restorations will do to the experience of attending a performance or event at the Saenger. Additionally, the imminent improvements will give us a performance hall that will surpass any within a two-hour radius. Imagine what type of additional shows and events the renovated Saenger will be able to attract. When one looks at the plans for what will be done, it’s easy to connect the dots of how downtown, Pensacola, and the region will benefit from this project.

The promoters and managers of the Saenger conservatively estimate that within a year of reopening, the historic theatre will be hosting performances around 180 dates a year. While I applaud them for not over selling the anticipated benefit, my knowledge of similar historic theatre renovations in other cities leads me to believe that the increase in use will more likely be somewhere north of 50% during the second year after the completion of renovations. Folks, that’s 70 plus more days of use. Doesn’t it make sense to give up 14 days of business for thirteen months in anticipation of getting more than 70

extra days of patronage for years into the future? The difference certainly sounds like a good deal to me.

Cities and counties all across the country have recognized the economic benefits that the restoration and repositioning of their historic downtown theatres can bring. Places as diverse as Bloomington, Indiana, Knoxville, Tennessee, Portland, Oregon, Chico, California and Minneapolis have all opted to do what we are just getting underway at the Saenger. The respective results have all been overwhelmingly positive for the arts, the audiences, the surrounding businesses, and the downtown nightlife as well as the tax base and image of the community. The late summer of 2008 can't get here fast enough for me.