



Heritage Theatre will be saved

By PAM DOUGLAS
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The Heritage Theatre can be saved, and there are plans in the works to develop it into a space for art, culture and entertainment, the city revealed this week.

The fate of the old Vaudville-turned-movie-turned-live theatre has been up in the air ever since a consultant nixed the idea of renovating it into a major live theatre venue almost 10 years ago. That's when city councillors decided to build the Rose Theatre instead, and there was a controversial decision to tear down the Heritage Theatre, although that was never acted on.

Following a second, more recent consultant's report on possible re-uses of the 87-year-old building, city staff are now recommending:

- the facade and marquee of the theatre be restored to its original 1920s design;
- the floor levelled out and the interior be renovated and used in a variety of ways in support of arts, cultural and entertainment events;
- retail/commercial uses could occupy the space fronting Main Street North;
- adapt the second floor spaces for administration and commercial use;
- the north wall be opened up to lead out to patios or a garden space.

The recommendations are based on the ERA Architects study, which looked at the theatre and the three commercial buildings in the same block. The study found the buildings are in good condition and all are worth preserving.

City councillors expressed their support for the general concepts outlined in the staff report at Committee of Council Wednesday morning. The recommendations are expected to get final approval at City Council next Wednesday.

Also, a public meeting will be held for input on the plan for what the city calls the Heritage Theatre Block, which consists of the theatre and three other properties all owned by the city.

The preliminary estimate of the work on the Heritage Block is between \$4 million and \$5 million, money that will have to be factored in to the 2011 city budget.

That is, unless money for the project can be secured from a federal or provincial government fund, Mayor Susan Fennell pointed out Wednesday.

"It's music to my ears," said Regional Councillor John Sanderson. "I spent a lot of my youth in that theatre. I'd hate to see it gone. I think that theatre can be made into something beautiful in the downtown."

Other councillors agreed.

At the moment, the theatre, which the city has owned since 1981, is being maintained, but not used.

The other three buildings in the block, immediately south of the Heritage, are two-storey commercial properties.

The report recommends facade improvements to 76-78-80 Main St. N., and retail/commercial uses for the ground floor, with office services on the upper floors. At 72-74 Main St. N., also known as the Robson Block, the report recommends opening the south wall to "animate" adjacent Vivian Lane and increase the retail frontage.

The upper floors could be used for office/service or cultural amenities.

The city will begin work on a business plan for the operation, programming and re-use of the buildings.



The Heritage Theatre today. Photo by Ken Hay