

Fat lady sings for East Side theatre

100-year-old Pantages Theatre up for sale

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The future looks dim for the restoration of the oldest theatre in western Canada.

For the last 38 months, developer Marc Williams of Worthington Properties, along with a number of local arts groups, have met and negotiated with the city to restore the 100-year-old Pantages Theatre. The \$26 million proposal includes social housing in an adjacent building. But despite the talks, the building's owner, an unspecified numbered company, has finally listed the six-lot property for sale.

The property's listing prompted Peter Fairchild, chairman of the Pantages Theatre Arts Society, to send an email plea Oct. 21 urging supporters to write city hall on behalf of the theatre project. Also on Oct. 21, the city posted a press release saying it was going to fund "a feasibility study to explore the potential future of the Pantages Theatre site located at 144 East Hastings St. in the Downtown Eastside." The press release is unsigned.

"My understanding is, [city council] made the decision in camera last Thursday," said Peter Fairchild, chairman of the Pantages Theatre Arts Society. "The fact that they commissioned a study leads me to believe they're not comfortable with the extent of information they currently have. But I don't know. I can't speak for the city."

Jennifer Young, assistant director of corporate communications for the city, directed the Courier to the city's press release.

In his email, Fairchild quoted the building's owner: "We tried for over three years to find a financially viable proposal that would satisfy the many interests at stake," he wrote. "Ultimately, we could not. The Pantages was a very powerful idea. The theatre, the housing, the retail businesses--the combination was extraordinary. I was proud to have been part of it. I am so disappointed we could not make it work."

Had the plan gone through, City Opera of Vancouver, the Vancouver Cantonese Opera and Vancouver Moving Theatre would have operated the theatre. The Pantages Theatre Arts Society also has expressions of commitment from the drama departments of UBC and SFU. "There's been a lot of interest in utilizing the theatre, especially for community needs," said Fairchild.

The last survivor of a chain of vaudeville theatres, the Pantages opened in 1908. It was last used as a Chinese-language theatre, which closed in 1994. Restored, the theatre would seat 650, offering a bridge between small and large houses in the city. An entrance on East Pender would have provided a new lobby. Since the announcement of the plans, more than 2,000 people toured the inside of the building in an attempt to help sway public opinion.

"What we're trying to do now is demonstrate to the city that the immensity of support and the seriousness of engagement in this extraordinary project is for real, and all of these people are going to be writing to you and talking to you," said Charles Barber, artistic director of City Opera of Vancouver.

The Pantages is "utterly unique," according to Barber. "It offers an opportunity to the city--if they will but grasp it in time. We've tried to tell them that the Pantages provides an opportunity for the city, and the people, to do a 180 at Hastings and Main. That is the power of theatre.

Barber said it was an "amazing" project. "But, we've run out of time. It's maddening that everyone says yes. But nobody does yes. We've been hearing the bugles for years, but the cavalry never arrives."

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