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Taylor County group works to restore historic Manos Theater

GRAFTON, W.Va. — A group of volunteers in Taylor County are working to bring back one of the area’s most historic theaters. The Manos Theater, located in downtown Grafton, has been a part of the town’s footprint since the early 20th Century, first opening as the Hippodrome — later the Strand Theater — in 1912.

“It’s been closed now for several years,” committee chairman Tom Hart said Tuesday during an appearance on WAJR-Clarksburg’s “The Gary Bowden Show.” “Of course, when you leave something sitting, it doesn’t always get maintained and it starts going south, but a group of us talked, and we wanted to try to initiate action to make something happen with this theater to get it back open so it can serve the community both in the performing arts and possibly, once again, with some motion pictures.”

Though the group is still in the organizational stages, those traveling through Grafton have likely noticed changes to the facades already occurring.

“Somewhere in the 70s there was some fake stone applied to the front of that building, so we did get a company that volunteered some labor from their workers to come in and remove that fake stone so we can assess what we have there,” Hart said. “Lo and behold, we found some pretty interesting brick archways that was part of the original structure that’s been hidden since 1948.”

Hart said some in the community complained about why Grafton’s former residents would cover up such architecture.

“I said, ‘You know, you have to understand. They’d just come back from World War II, they’d made it through the Depression, so they wanted everything nice and shiny and glittery.’ That’s why the old archway got covered up,” he said.

As the group continues the revitalization process, Hart said they’d like for the completed project to as much resemble the 1912 structure as possible.

“We do have some old photographs of it, and we want to try to make it as tasteful and adhere to as much history as we can,” he said. “With that being said, of course, the city of Grafton does own that building, so it’s actually their call on what ultimately happens with it as far as the design of what it’s going to look like.”

Next, Hart and the other volunteers will be visiting Clarksburg, as well as other cities that have rebuilt their historic downtown theatres, to ask questions to help formulate a plan for renovating and raising funds.

“We had the opportunity in talking with the architect that worked on the Robinson Grand, and he set up a tour for us to come over and take a look at what’s happened over there, so a small group of us are going to do that, and we’re very excited,” Hart said.

Though the Robinson Grand Performing Arts Center is much larger than the Manos Theater, which sits 275, Hart’s looking forward to “picking the brain” of those involved in bringing the Robinson Grand back to life.

“I really appreciate our neighboring community being open to us and trying to prevent us from making any needless mistakes. That’s a good thing, and I’m sure we’ll get some good information out of it,” he said.

There’s also a few other trips on the radar. “Some of us were sitting around the coffee shop and a lady from Uniontown, Pennsylvania came in and was telling us about their theater there,” Hart said. “Of course, again it’s another large one like the Robinson Grand and much larger than the Manos, but we want to hop in the car at some point and run up there and take a look at it.”

As the project continues to move forward, Hart said the community support thus far has been tremendous.

“We just recently had the first ever Born and Bred Music Festival, which had a number of musical groups with local ties, and it was hugely successful,” he said.

The fundraiser raised roughly \$10,000 that will be used toward the theater’s revitalization.

“That was just the start, and we’ve also had a few other rather sizable donations that have come in to go towards that as well,” Hart said. “We’re just getting started, but the attraction and the interest is definitely there for it.”

And Hart’s optimistic that support will continue.

“I think the resources will be there,” he said. “It’s a matter of getting a plan together and determining the path forward that we’re going to take, and once we get that plan and get it working, I firmly believe that success will come. I keep telling folks that failure on this is not an option. We’re not going to fail. It’s going to happen.”

Hart’s determination comes from knowing such a project is vital for Grafton’s downtown.

“We need it here on Main Street, and I know this is true for many communities here in West Virginia and beyond,” he said. “Your Main Streets need an anchor point. They need revitalization, but you always need an anchor just like you have in the big shopping malls that gives it something to pull people in and to serve as a showpiece. That’s what we’re looking at on the Manos Theater.”

Read more about the theater’s restoration on its [Facebook page](#).

