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The Salt Lake Tribune

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Capital looks to activate mothballed Utah Theater

Main Street » SLC may pursue short-term retail tenants or artist studios in front of classic movie house.

By [Derek P. Jensen](#)
The Salt Lake Tribune

Updated: 02/09/2010 11:10:04 PM MST

A vaudeville house tweaked into artist vestibules? Serving coffee instead of cinema?

Salt Lake City leaders are spit-balling ideas on what to do with their newly purchased Utah Theater -- both short-term and long -- in the spirit of activating Main Street.

The City Council, acting as the Redevelopment Agency on Tuesday, elected to launch a work group to consider whether to invite temporary tenants -- think coffee huts or artist studios -- or to tackle a massive rebuild of the theater and adjoining retail space from 144 to 156 South Main St.

The capital still anticipates making the theater the future home of the Salt Lake City Film Center -- complete with support space for Capitol Theatre -- likely funded and run by Salt Lake County. But multiple RDA members favor the idea of preparing the 15,000 square feet of retail space in hopes of securing short-term commercial tenants.

"It could be easily designed as a pretty flexible space, especially with parking under it," Councilman Soren Simonsen said. He suggested an exterior passageway be preserved but spruced up to resemble something like Post Alley in Seattle.

Councilman Van Turner, who recently toured the cavernous and severely compromised theater space, says most residents likely don't know what's there.

"I was totally blown away by the square footage," he said. "In the short term, there's a huge opportunity for retail. The Mayflower restaurant's beautiful -- totally a treasure in there."

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A city report says the Mayflower and former Daynes Music store are in reasonably good condition, while the other two non-theater spaces would require larger investments to prepare them for occupancy. The RDA is struggling to fill its small retail spaces on Gallivan Avenue, roughly a block away.

"We're interested in seeing the most activity for the amount of money we can spend," said Mayor Ralph Becker, adding nothing is yet budgeted.

In early January, the RDA closed on the purchase of the Utah Theater for \$5.5 million. RDA Executive Director D.J. Baxter says another "wild hair" option is to demolish the theater and

construct a new building with leasable space on its footprint. "It would provide the opportunity to build whatever facade you wanted," he said.

New Councilman Stan Penfold said it is "critical" to him to preserve the theater's feel, including restoring some semblance of the original facade.

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» The Redevelopment Agency was told by urban-design consultants that a year-round public market is probably not a good fit for a planned makeover of the Depot District just east of the transit hub.

"If you were going to do it, this probably isn't the location because of access," said Marilee Utter with Citiventure Associates. "It's retail, and this is a tough retail site."

A mix of residential, office space and educational use is better, she said, while a small grocery outlet would be a "home run."

Citiventure presented an interim report on how to overhaul the moribund district from 200 South to 400 South and 500 West down to 600 West into a "commuter village."

Groundwater, planners say, is not a deal-breaker, while opening access to the north along 500 West may be necessary.

Consultants say transforming the area, which has land costs that are "tantamount" to Main Streets', will take staff energy, financing and political will.

» Mayor Ralph Becker and the City Council passed a joint resolution calling on the Utah Legislature and the governor to take action to prevent excessive payday lending interest rates in Utah.

» The RDA approved a \$2.2 million building renovation loan for Hamilton Partners Boston to add restrooms, showers and other tenant amenities to the Boston Building at 9 Exchange Place.

Derek P. Jensen

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