

Saving The Theaters, Saving Vermillion

BY SARAH WETZEL
For the Plain Talk

Bill Anderson, President of Vermillion Downtown Cultural Association, held a press conference Wednesday to answer questions regarding the new ownership of the downtown movie theaters and discussing future plans for them.

Q: How will the business aspect work?
A: A number of us on the Downtown Cultural Association have business experience. We've run small businesses; we've been involved in large businesses. We understand profit, loss and financial projections, those sorts of things.

The biggest challenge has been day to day operations. We have a terrific manager here who understands the nuances of running the operations of the theater day to day so our job is to get the theaters to run the best they can. Prepared equipment, new equipment, clean theaters, the sorts of things that maybe in the past weren't resourced appropriately we're able to start doing now because of some of the upfront investment in the theaters, people who have kindly donated and also provided no interest loans over a five year period to help us get this up and running.

I can tell you the first three weeks our booker probably wanted to reach through the email and strangle us because we asked the most ridiculous questions and we assumed things we didn't know. Most of the things were done on paper before so we were scanning things to her in paper and she folks with computer systems. It's give and take as we understand how this business works but frankly it doesn't work much differently than a highly functioning restaurant or print shop or anything else.

Q: What has been done to make the theater more attractive to the community and student population in this technology-driven age?

A: You highlight an important challenge.

I can sit in my home and watch on my flat-screen TV and get whatever I want to. Movies are a commodity. You can get them cheap wherever and whenever you want them.

There's something unique about the cinema experience. It can't be a commodity. It can't be an expectation that because there is a movie theater in your town people will come because they won't. We were starting to see that was the case. USD was directing people to its own union for films rather than coming downtown.

I think taking for granted that people will come to the movies is something you can't do anymore. I'm a pretty firm believer and all those who are members of the Downtown Cultural Association are firm believers in the idea that cinema is an experience. You go because you get to stare at a big screen. The popcorn is ridiculously expensive but that's part of the experience, too. It's date night with dinner and a movie. It's those things that are part of the fabric of many of our lives and I don't envision that changing for a long time.

The movie industry outlook doesn't envision that changing. For a town like ours we're particularly well positioned because we don't have movies except for Yankton 23 miles to the West, Sioux City



SARAH WETZEL/ FOR THE PLAIN TALK

The new Vermillion Downtown Cultural Association swooped in to ensure that Vermillion retains its movie theaters with renovations on the Coyote Twin and the reopening of the Vermillion Theater expected.

37 miles to the South, Sioux Falls 50 miles to the North. So we're in a great position to hold a market here if we take care of the people who come to the movies.

To us the first most important thing is day to day operations in the theater. Making sure they're clean, that they feel good that they're comfortable. We've spent a lot of time on that. We spent two days, we had 30 students come and clean out the second level of the theater, the basement of the theater, started to pull up rows of seats that were dangerous, that were liabilities. We're still working on repairs on seats on the Coyote Twin Two to get them more firmly anchored.

Our vision in the next year is to replace all the seats, to look into the potential of stadium seating for these theaters. We know we can do it. It's just a matter of resources to make that happen, putting new seats in both those theaters and making it more comfortable, more typical of what you might find in a larger theater. That's really what we're looking for here at Coyote Twin. New coats of paint, carpet cleaned every week, very deep cleaned every quarter. We had a cleaning service in this week. They deep-cleaned all the seats, they deep-cleaned all the carpets, they deep-cleaned all the concrete in and around the seats.

We still have more work to do but that's the thing that we're committed to. There's a new ice machine going in today. We had a speaker that was blown in Coyote Twin Two. All the sounds were fuzzy and vibrating. We had that speaker replaced yesterday. Those are the sort of commitments that we want to make to the community to improve their experience. There was a fan that was out for the air conditioning in this building that cools the entire lobby. People were sweating walking into the movie theater. Our staff was having to wear shorts and t-shirts because they were uncomfortable. Just those small things. They're relatively small investments that make a big difference in the cinema experience.

The vision is really address the Vermillion Theater first and get it up and running as much as we possibly can and possibly look at facade changes there. We're working with Jeff Hazard in Sioux Falls to help us re-envision what the front of that building could look like and how that could fit in with

the downtown streetscape. We're going to do the same thing here. We're looking at ways we could make the interim operational changes and the facility changes to make it a more pleasant experience.

We're thinking about re-envisioning the lobby area. The staircase here is one thing that we're perplexed about because it's a staircase that's intended for the staff only but it takes up a ton of foot space and interrupts guest flow. We're going to think about that too.

Q: Are movies currently being shown in both theaters?

A: Coyote Twin One and Two have movies showing in both. The Vermillion Theater, the interesting story there is that a digital projector was ruined in Coyote Two. It was because water leaked in through the roof so they had to make a decision so they took the digital projector and brought it over here and closed that one. Our priority is, through fundraising and operations, is going to be to get that theater open as quickly as we can. We'd like to have [the Vermillion Theater] open by the time January rolls around. It's very close. It requires about \$35,000-\$40,000 worth of digital equipment. It really needs some restroom upgrades. It needs new equipment in the concession area. We're really confident we can make that investment quickly and start that up. That creates so many new options for us with respect to theater programming and also the ability to push long-run movies over there and keep fresh content here.

Q: What made the Vermillion Downtown Cultural Association come together and make this happen?

A: There had been a lot of conversation regarding a Downtown Cultural Association anyway. This idea that this is a really cultural city. We have a really diverse group of people at the university that contributes to that. We have an amazing business community here. We just felt there was an opportunity to look at Main St. and to enhance the store fronts on Main St.

Then the movie theater opportunity came up and there was a sense of urgency. This was the

perfect opportunity. Number one it's culturally enriching, number two it creates opportunities with partnership with the university and the business community. Number three everybody loves movies.

This was a perfect storm for us. We're not for profit. Our job is not making margin for the sake of making margin. Our job is to run a successful operation here that allows us to take that revenue and invest it elsewhere in downtown. Our founding investors in this project, they want to take whatever dollars they get back they want to put it into the next project. It's almost like angel investments into the downtown projects.

Q: How will the theater benefit and work with the downtown businesses?

A: From our perspective, one of the things that was really inspiring to us is that we could partner with Red Steakhouse. At 9 p.m. or 8:50 p.m. tabletops aren't filled at Red. What if we could do some cross-promotion where if they come from the theater to Red they get 10 percent off their meal? They're still paying servers at that time? How can we help them return on that server investment? Or Scoops, or Cafe Brule. It's not just us porting people out, it's us bringing their product in.

We're looking right now at a series with the National Music Museum. On Saturdays at 10 in the morning they would show a music-related film and have a short talk by a scholar related to the film. What we could do with the partnership with Cafe Brule is bring in coffee, lattes, pastries which would be an entirely different experience than Mike and Ike's and popcorn.

The theaters are a draw for downtown so it's good for business anyway but I think we could amplify that through partnerships with downtown businesses?

Q: What other types of films do you look to bring in?

A: I think our long-term goal is to bring Independent Films. We also want to have classic movies. We want to have marathons. One of our founding board members wants a John Wayne marathon. At the end of the day I think that would be a successful operation because that's the nature of this community but in near term first-run movies are helping keep the lights on.

We're looking for every possibility where studios don't govern the time we show their movies, to show things we want to.

Next Friday we're starting a Friday Night Classic Cult Series. Every first Friday night at 11:59 p.m., they can get a ticket, a small pop and a small popcorn for \$10 and they can watch an old classic movie. Our first one is going to be "The Princess Bride" next Friday night. We're going to show the same movie on Saturday morning at 10 a.m. for people who don't want to get up at 11:59 at night. Our goal is to be a subscription series on that, but those sorts of possibilities are endless.

Q: How are funds coming in for the renovations and is the price of tickets expected to change at all?

A: We don't have any plans to change the price of admission. In fact we're going to be dropping the price of USD student admission by \$1.50. That's because the university has contributed operating costs to the theater as part of its student activity dollars. Otherwise we don't expect admission to be going up.

The only exception to that is online ticketing. Our online ticketing agent charges an extra 50 cents per ticket. Vermilliontheaters.com just went up and running. We will connect that website to online ticketing within the next three weeks. That will happen at the same time we're connecting the sales system so there will be no more hard copy tickets going up.

We're going to have touch screens where people can handle their concessions and tickets in one fell swoop rather than getting their ticket here and going over to the concession stand.

From the dollar standpoint we've had a number of founding donors who are interested in just keeping the theaters alive. Most of those individuals have contributed \$5,000 or around that mark to help us acquire the buildings and to give us some initial operating costs. Right now we have contributions from the Vermillion Chamber Development Corporation, a \$10,000 no-interest loan over a five-year period and also a \$5,000 grant match so if we raise \$5,000 they'll grant us \$5,000 which is an amazing partnership.

Then we also received a generous donation from the university for capital improvements. That's our base. We have a small group of people led by Ted Muenster who knows how to raise money. They're putting together a fundraising plan for us. Part of the issue with figuring out fundraising is you need to have your vision, you need to start looking at the costs. The theaters are operational and successful. They were working before we got them. They were making reasonable margin and so day to day operational funds are covering many of the initial funds we have to make.

Vice President Michelle Maloney also gave some comments:

"When they sold the equipment from the Vermillion Theater we kind of saw it as mission critical and actually Becky Schroeder because she was the first one that called the meeting of Bill, myself and Ted Muenster. The four of us sat and talked about it. Then it sort of went away and nothing ever really happened. When they sold off the equipment we had to do something. That's how we started off. When we told the university they said you improve the theaters and we'll move everybody down there. They were 100 percent supportive. It's been the greatest collaboration in the history of the university and Vermillion. They're a huge piece of this puzzle."

For more information visit vermilliontheaters.com or like the [Vermillion Theaters Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/vermilliontheaters).

Passick

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we've got a supply of shoes. It's not enough to clothe everyone, but it helps out for those who don't have it or can't find it."

The performance date of the show was actually delayed, presenting some more challenges.

"In the past we've been able to look at the University's stock before we went shopping, but this year was a little different because of the delay in the production. So, we actually went shopping and got fabric and patterns that worked with the period," Passick said. "Then finally we were able to get to the University. They were busy with the Shakespeare festival so we didn't want to impose ourselves on the costume person. She showed us where the period costumes were and we looked at what would work with what would fit, what's the right color and we just kind of pulled them and put them on a rack and brought them over. That was mid-June and we didn't even have bodies to try things on until the 12th of July."

The delay caused by the construction on the high school has resulted in many

of the rehearsals being moved to Aalfs Auditorium on the University of South Dakota campus, which means the costumes have to be hauled back and forth, as well.

"Despite all the changes it's gone quite well," Passick said. "The costuming is going very well. We're about ready to move on to the hats and their construction."

The biggest part of Passick's job isn't the sewing, it's the organization.

"I've got charts that I make so I know who's doing what," she said. "Who's the sweeps and who's the costumers and I check off costumes. All their clothing is going to be tagged with their name then I'll check it off that I have it, so I know what additional pieces need to be found for the people who haven't found them yet."

Cast members are required to help out with some of the costumes.

"Every year we do ask people to furnish some of their own things," Passick said. "This year it's the black pants and shirts. Surprisingly, most people do have something that they already have and already wear."

Though it's a big and sometimes overwhelming

task, Passick said she enjoys costuming a show.

"I like the creativity end of it," she said. "I really enjoy working with the people. There's a lot of experience. A lot of shows have been done by Anthony and Sandy and Brian and it's really fun to be a part of it. It's not something I was aspiring to do, that's for sure. Once I did it and then they liked what I did and I was asked to come back, it's very uplifting. I've enjoyed working with the VCT."

Mary Poppins performance dates are set on August 21 (7:30 p.m.), August 22 (7:30 p.m.), August 23 (2:30 p.m.) and August 24 (7:30 p.m.) in the Vermillion High School Performing Arts Center.

Tickets will be available beginning Aug. 7 at Nook n' Cranny and Davis Pharmacy in Vermillion and can be purchased at the door.

For more information, visit vermillioncommunitytheatre.org.

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