

Bringing Back the Milbridge Theatre - an Impassioned Community Effort

Running any business or non-profit organization in today's economy isn't easy. Opening a new movie theater in a rural region like Downeast Maine is particularly daunting. But an impassioned effort to reopen the iconic Milbridge Theatre is gaining steam and stirring the passions and support of our community.

The nearly 80-year-old theater has been closed since the 2014 death of its longtime owner, Dave Parsons. The lack of entertainment and cultural offerings has been keenly felt in our village of 1,300 and across a wide area of Downeast. The vacant and dilapidated building, no longer safe for public occupation, is quickly becoming a blight in the village center.

However, a group of determined residents is working to purchase the site and rebuild the structure to restore a much-needed community-gathering place and entertainment hub. We're making great progress and encountering support from many people who recognize this as a project undertaken by and for the community, aimed at increasing quality of life for us all.

[GATEWAY: Milbridge](#), the community organization formed in response to the public's concern over the fate of the theater, has a Board of 14 community leaders and residents who donate countless hours of their personal time. To date, we've held two public awareness-building events that enlisted about 30 local volunteers. Our Facebook page has 286 members statewide, and 104 individuals participated in an online community survey about the theater. Although fundraising has been limited to a Gofundme site and private donations, we've already raised several thousand dollars from individual donors to help purchase the theater. The next step is to expand fundraising, including applying for matching grants.

The Milbridge Theatre has been a community icon since 1937. Residents relied on the theater for entertainment and gathering together. Many "firsts" occurred here: first movie, first kiss, first date. My own first love will forever be associated with the Milbridge Theatre; this campaign has resurrected similar memories from many supporters.

Reconstructing the Milbridge Theatre will serve Downeast communities in the vast area between Ellsworth and Eastport. With the recent closing of the Ellsworth movie theater, residents must travel up to 90 miles to see a first-run film, and 30-to-70 miles to see a live theater performance.

The new Milbridge Theatre will not only show movies, but will host live performances, local talent, historic and art film, educational programs, and other community events. Importantly, it will provide a venue for the region's youth to develop their artistic and creative interests.

Above all, bringing back the Milbridge Theatre will contribute greatly to our economy. It will create jobs and skill-building volunteer opportunities. Theater-goers will go out to

dinner, buy gas, poke around in the gallery and gift shops, and maybe even spend the night in town and visit nearby communities. With a central gathering place re-established and community activity increased, youth will have greater reason to stick around, and young adults from away may be more attracted to move here. Over time, such activity could inspire entrepreneurs to open new businesses, contributing to the growth and vitality of the region.

We are assessing the most appropriate model for operating the theater going forward, whether non-profit organization or for-profit business. Either way, Milbridge Theatre will contribute significantly to our economy and the village's tax revenues. GATEWAY: Milbridge will replace the existing building with a newly constructed, safe and modern theater that will require an initial investment of several hundred thousand dollars—a significant increase to the building's currently assessed value.

Milbridge is a critical commercial center for Washington County residents and is the western gateway to the Bold Coast Scenic Byway (boldcoastbyway.com), which connects over 125 miles of stunning coastal scenery. Milbridge serves as the region's welcome center to a potential market of over two million annual visitors to Acadia National Park, approximately 6% of whom currently continue on to Washington County, mainly through Milbridge.

Investing in the vitality of Milbridge—starting with bringing back the Milbridge Theatre—will ultimately attract visitors to the farther reaches of Washington County, bringing greater recognition to our local attractions, deeper exploration of our unique assets, and stronger investment in our economy by visitors and residents.

We're well on the way to making the Milbridge Theatre a reality. Fundraising is underway, and we need to raise initial funds to purchase the property by early summer. For more information, and to help make this community dream come true, please visit GatewayMilbridge.org or contact one of our many Board members listed on the website.