

## **Bringing Back the Milbridge Theatre - an Impassioned Community Effort**

Running any business or non-profit organization in today's world isn't easy. Rebuilding and reopening a full service theatre and community arts center 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.

Our nearly 80-year-old theatre closed following the 2014 death of its longtime owner, Dave Parsons. The lack of entertainment and cultural offerings was keenly felt in our village of 1,300 and across a wide area of Downeast. However, a group of determined residents is working together, as Gateway Milbridge, to bring back the theatre as a new and expanded facility. 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 improving the quality of life for us all.

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

The new Milbridge Theatre will not only show films, 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. Theatre-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.

Investing in the vitality of Milbridge-with projects like 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.

Gateway Milbridge, has a board of 11 community leaders and residents who donate countless hours of their personal time. To date, we've held several public awareness-building events and activities that enlisted about 30 local volunteers. Our Facebook page has over 1,400 members and over 300 individuals participated in an online community survey about the theatre. We've already raised over \$200,000 from individual donors and organizations to propel the project forward.

It's truly been an amazing period of progress with the theatre project. You helped us conclude the purchase of the theatre/land in full, complete removal of the structurally unsound parts of the building, and create an interim plan to make the theatre property useful immediately, while improving the appearance of our downtown, and providing a benefit to all of our area residents.

With your input, we developed and accomplished three specific and beneficial projects/goals:

- Clearing the lot (except for the front "Marquee Shoppe" section of the building which is being retained), terracing it gently to the rear, and converting it to an attractive green space
- Renovating and reopening the Marquee Shoppe section of the building as a mini-museum and shop.
- Constructing, as an interim step, an outdoor theatre/stage 14x24 feet on the rear of the lot to host regular community entertainment, including outdoor movies and small music performances.

\*Over 50% of the costs of labor and materials for building the outdoor stage and Marquee Shoppe renovations/expansion were donated by businesses and skilled workers from the area. Thank you!

Starting at the end of last summer, we began hosting FREE, live music performances using the new outdoor stage. In addition, through the generosity of a donor, we have purchased outdoor movie equipment (projection, sound, screen etc). We are working on movie licensing agreements so we can host outdoor/indoor movies for everyone to enjoy. We are working to complete the new addition to the Marquee Shoppe to include a small kitchen and public restrooms for use during performances. For summer 2018, a regular series of Friday night events is planned on the outdoor stage with music, movies, and other performances throughout the summer - right in the middle of town. The goal is to have "something for everyone" from across the area.

We anticipate using the outdoor stage and Marquee Shoppe for two to three years while we prepare and conduct a larger capital campaign effort to raise the funds necessary for the construction of a new theatre and arts center building on the lot.

Our major capital campaign effort will seek funding from a variety of sources, including local individuals, local businesses, foundation grants, public grants for community development, and significant volunteer efforts. No funding is being sought or provided from the town government or local tax dollars.

We have drafted a business plan to take us through the next three to four years. The business plan draws from extensive interviews with other theatres in the region and from major donors and gifting groups/foundations across Maine.

In addition, we are working with an architect who has generously donated his time to help us with design concepts for a new building. Our goal is to have a modern and flexible-use building with a street-front appearance replicating the original theatre as much as possible while blending well with surrounding buildings.

Please help us keep the momentum and progress going. Your support is critical to this project. Gateway Milbridge is a 501c3 designated nonprofit organization. Donations are tax-deductible. You can make a tax-deductible donation on our website by credit card, or you may donate by check. Check donations may be made payable and sent to: Gateway Milbridge, PO Box 62, Milbridge, ME 04658

On behalf of all of us at Gateway Milbridge, thank you for helping us bring back the Milbridge Theatre while reinvigorating Milbridge's downtown and sense of community spirit!