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## Could this abandoned 1,300-seat theater hidden in downtown Worcester be brought back to life?



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Gallery: Take a look inside this abandoned vintage theater hidden in the middle of downtown Worcester (See below)

By [Noah R. Bombard](#)

You could pass by the unremarkable brick facade a hundred times and have little clue as to what lies inside.

But step across the sidewalk on Worcester's Pleasant Street, across the faded entryway where you can still see "Olympia Theatre" spelled out in mosaic tiles on the ground, and through the door into the debris-strewn lobby and you step back in time. A wooden staircase takes a couple of turns to the second floor where you emerge into a cavernous theater.

A main floor, large balcony and box seating face the stage of the auditorium, which once sat 1,300 people.

Opened in 1891 as Lothrop's Opera House, the Olympia is the city's oldest theater. It's also the last of Worcester's mid-sized theaters left standing that still bears any resemblance to its once grand decor -- now run-down, darkened and covered in layers of dust.

It opened in the age of vaudeville. As the 20th century dawned and silent films became the new entertainment it made the transition to movie theater, then art cinema before finally spending its final years as one of two pornographic theaters in Worcester's downtown. It closed in January 2006 and has sat empty since.

But as hundreds of units of pricey new market-rate apartments and urban development bring focus to the city's downtown, the Olympia, just a few hundred feet from a planned \$11 million Main Street renovation, is drawing attention once again.

"There is interest in it, I can tell you that," said Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, which has identified the theater as an endangered structure. "Within the past month I've had two different parties call me about it."

Packard referred the developers to building owner Dick Rizzo, who acquired the property for the bargain price of \$60,000 in 2006 just after the theater closed. The-then owners had been asking \$400,000, he said. Rizzo wasn't initially interested, but a friend encouraged him to make an offer.

"It was just a stroke of luck, really," he said.

The problem is, Rizzo isn't too interested in selling the property.

"There's a possibility I would consider at some point, depending on who I talk to," Rizzo said. "If I sold anything, I might consider selling the theater itself and keeping the streetfront locations."

The building includes two first-level storefronts that currently hold a small restaurant and a recovery center. Although the theater sits empty, Rizzo said he wants to keep the rent-paying storefronts.

But while preservationists would like to see the theater rehabbed and Rizzo would like to hold onto the property, a third party entered the equation in 2016.

As part of its downtown revitalization plan, the city of Worcester has identified the Olympia among [20-some troubled properties](#) standing in the way of the city's ongoing renaissance and eyed for development. The message to property owners: invest in your property to improve it or risk the city taking it by eminent domain.

"The city wants to just bulldoze it and make it a parking lot," Rizzo said.

Michael Traynor, chief development officer for the city of Worcester says the city just doesn't want to see it sit empty. And since the state approved the city's revitalization plan in 2016, it now has the authority to take the property by eminent domain and tear it down.

"If the city were to acquire it, we'd be cleared to demo it and turn it over to a redeveloper," Traynor said. "That said, we're not gunning to go out and demolish the building. The city would like to see the property in reuse."

Walking around the theater, there's little doubt any attempt to bring it back as a performance venue would require a lot of work. There is no elevator to the theater, which is actually on the second floor of the structure. A hanging ceiling which was once constructed to hide the balcony has been torn down and piles of insulation sit in the balcony. It needs work.

Still, one thing all parties agree on -- the building is structurally in good shape.

"There was a new roof put on when I purchased the property," Rizzo said. "The building is phenomenally solid and there's been no termite problem or problems with any of the structure at all."

The city agrees.

"The building is structurally sound," Traynor said.

### **Cost to Rehab**

There has been no cost analysis done to the building to determine what it would take to bring the theater back into use as a venue -- or for any other use, for that matter. But supporters of reuse point out the Olympia is in much better shape than the Paris Cinema, which was demolished last year to make way for a beer garden as part of The Grid District on Franklin Street.

"There's no comparison," Packard said. "The last time I went into the Paris Cinema there was a gaping hole in the roof, there was piles of dirt in there, there were dead animals in there. I don't think [the Olympia] is in anywhere near that condition."

[A MassLive tour of the building in 2017](#) showed the Paris was in very bad shape.

By comparison, the 2,300 seat Hanover Theatre two blocks away, now considered an architectural and community treasure, cost \$32 million to rehab. The project was paid for through a combination of private and public funding and involved extensive reconstruction to the

theater, which had lost major design elements including the stage and upper seating boxes when it had been converted into a four-screen movie theater. It had been abandoned for a decade. The Hanover reopened in 2008 and has brought Broadway shows and performances to the city.

In Pittsfield, the 810-seat Colonial Theatre, built in 1910 and originally seating 1,400, [was rehabbed for \\$22 million](#) and reopened in 2006. About \$7 million of the funds to renovate came from donations, the rest from city, state and federal grants and tax credits.

Packard says for an interested developer, she believes the funding is there to bring back the Olympia.

"I think the biggest incentive is the historic tax credits, state and federal," Packard said. "It's on the National Register [of Historic Places] so it automatically qualifies for federal historic tax credits."

Federal and state tax credits combined could pay for about 35 percent of the cost of rehabilitation, Packard said.

### **The Theater District**

The Olympia sits on the edge of what the city has identified as the Theater District -- an area around the Hanover Theatre that has been targeted for development and improvements. But it's also part of a larger assortment of venues downtown that sit along Main Street.

The WBDC New Garden Park, Inc., the Worcester Business Development Corporation and the Worcester Cultural Coalition are in the process of building a small 300-seat black box theater on the first level of the old Telegram & Gazette building on Franklin Street. Further down Main Street is Mechanics Hall, a classic theater that hosts concerts, weddings, graduations and events. A block away from that is the 14,800-capacity DCU Center, a convention center and concert and sports space. Finally, at the northern end of Main Streets sits the unused Worcester Auditorium, the city's once-grand concert and performance space that is also a World War I memorial. It includes a separate performance space that once held shows under the name The Little Theatre. The auditorium has likewise been marked as endangered by preservationists.

But with the city focused on bringing more people downtown, there could still be a place for another venue with the right focus.

"If someone could come in and do something with that to make it unique, like an art house, it has its own scale and size that makes it unique," Traynor said. "I think there's room for that. I think there's room for multiple theater type uses in the Theater District."

For his part, Rizzo says he recognizes the city's downtown is changing.

"I know Worcester is coming along and every town that gets closer to Worcester the property values have been skyrocketing," Rizzo said. "I would consider partnering with someone who's got a lot of money. It would take the right person, really. They're out there."



[A rare look inside Worcester's abandoned Paris Cinema \(photos\)](#)

[A look at the inside of the closed building Monday shows the property to be in an intense state of decay, and the owners say returning the theater to its former splendor would cost upwards of \\$20 million.](#)

The pressure to do something may come sooner rather than later. The city has been talking for some time about taking the nearby Midtown Mall by eminent domain and is reserving that option for other properties that have been identified in the revitalization plan as well.

The Midtown Mall's owner, Dean Marcus, has reportedly denied several offers to purchase his property and the city has said it could exercise its right to take that property "sooner rather than later."

"Mr. Rizzo doesn't seem like he's willing to invest in the property to bring it into use," Traynor said.

A developer was interested in the property, Traynor said, but Rizzo offered to keep the two storefronts and the deal never came to fruition.

"We've said right along we'd like to work with existing owners," Traynor said. "If they can bring these properties up to a more viable use, we'd like to see that happen. If we can bring private owners in to make a deal with the current owner, we'd do that."

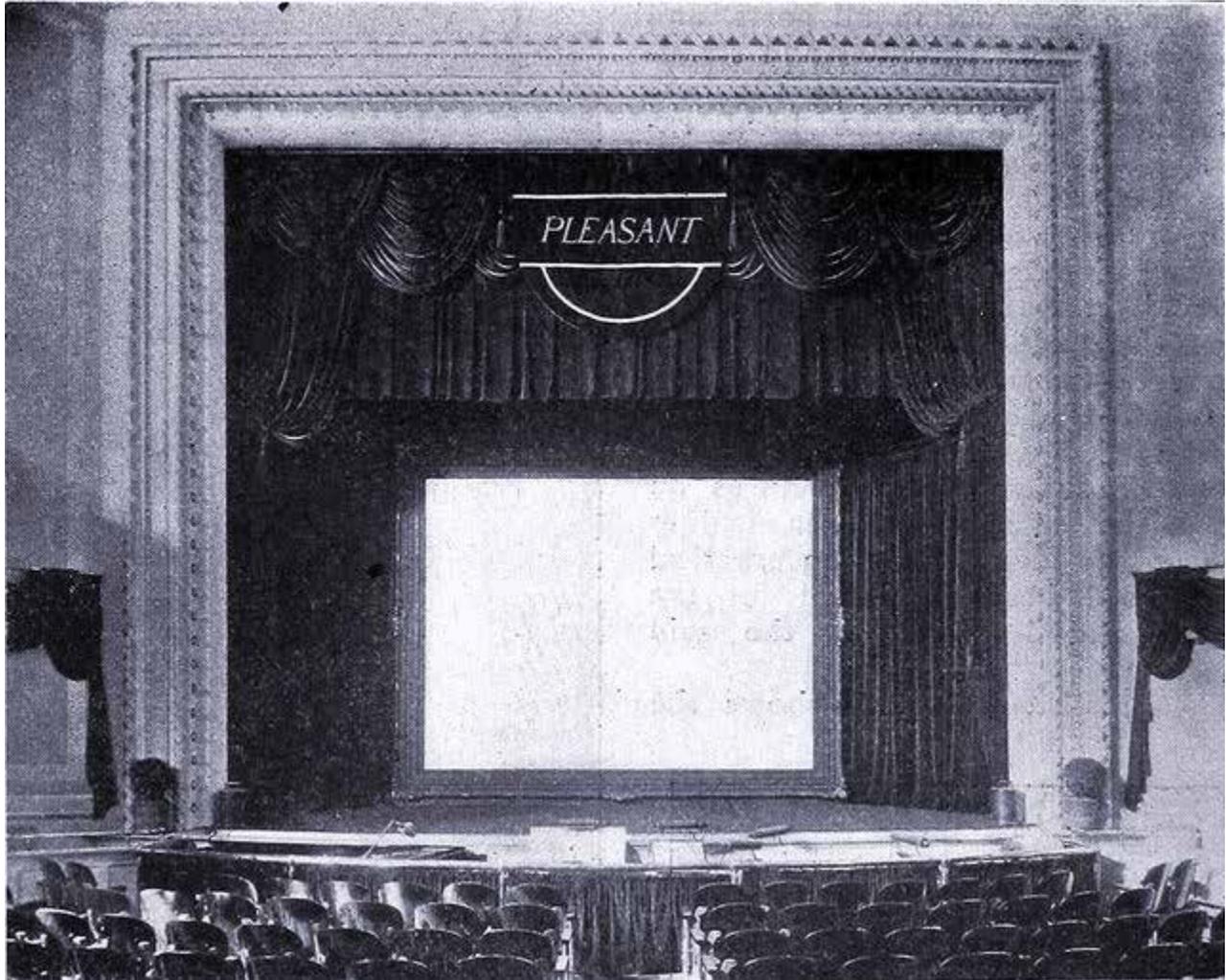
The last option is to take it by eminent domain for the purpose of tearing it down. Although Traynor says even that is not set in stone.

"We can also change that purpose of acquisition if there was someone who wanted to come in and rehab the building," he said.

It's happened before. The Worcester Auditorium and Union Station were both at one point thought to be too costly to save and were sure to be demolished. Both buildings now stand today as revitalized and architectural and cultural icons in the city.

Other reuse efforts have not fared so well. A few blocks away is the Notre Dame des Canadiens Church -- a large cathedral that has been a staple in the city's skyline for the past century. Ideas for its reuse ranged from performance venue to apartments to a brewery. In the end, however, preservationists lost that battle. The developer of that property, CitySquare II, is removing the granite church in order to leave a buildable lot.

Take a look inside this abandoned vintage theater hidden in the middle of downtown Worcester  
By Aviva Luttrell | MassLive.com | Posted on June 21, 2018 3:16 PM | Updated June 27, 2018  
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The Olympia Theatre has gone under many names through the years. Worcester's oldest still standing theater, this is the stage of the theater when it was called Lynch's Pleasant Street Theater.



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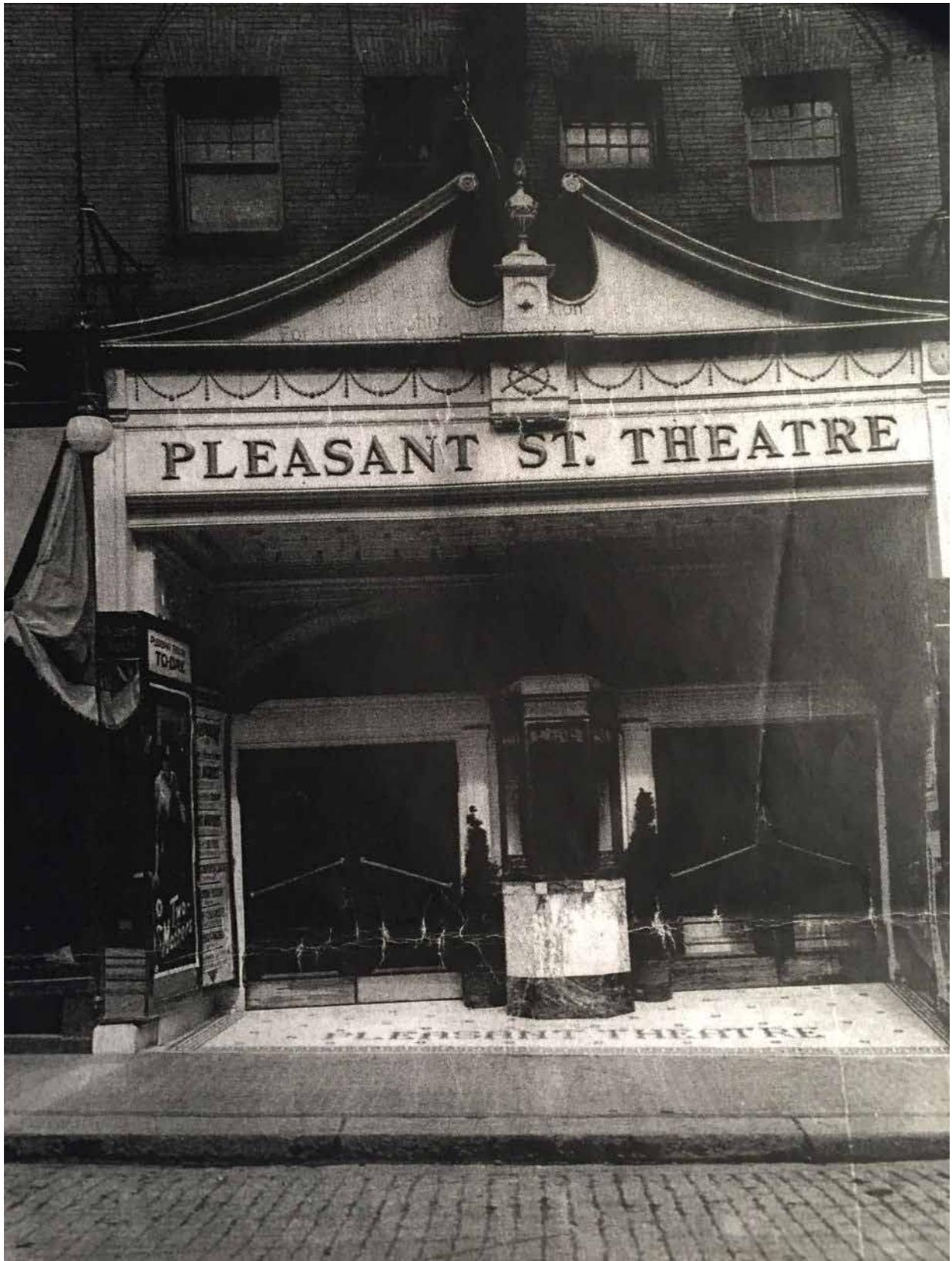
The stage as it looks today.



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There are a few seats remaining on the main floor.



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The entrance to the theater when it was called the Pleasant Street Theatre.



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Another era of the theater when it became the Fine Arts Theatre.



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The front of the theater when it was the Olympia. A fire escape was on the exterior of the building at that time with a ladder that would slide down to the street. There is still an escape on the backside of the building.



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The theater's final days at Art Theatre, showing pornographic films, one of two downtown theaters that did so. The other was the Paris Cinema, which was demolished in 2017.



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The exterior of the theater as it looks today. The theater is actually on the second floor of the building and the first floor is occupied by two storefronts, which are in use today as a small restaurant and a treatment center.



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A drop down ceiling that divided the balcony from the main theater floor was removed a few years ago and the insulation is still sitting on the end of the balcony.