

High Street Art Center: One Key to Downtown Revitalization

Friday, January 4, 2008

By: ROSEANN MIKOS

(NOTE: A slightly edited version of this was published on page 4 by the *Moorpark Acorn*. Copyright 2008, Moorpark Acorn. Reprinted by permission.)

This commentary is in response to the Acorn's stories about the High Street Arts Center published on December 21 and Dec. 28, in which my colleague and friend, Mayor Patrick Hunter, has raised concerns about the wisdom of the city or its redevelopment agency financially supporting the Arts Center. On many issues I agree with the Mayor. But this is not one of them.

On January 19, 2005, the Mayor/Agency Chair and all four agency members voted 5-0 to approve the current Moorpark Redevelopment Agency's Five-Year Implementation Plan (2005-2009). On page two, it states clearly: "during...this Implementation Plan, the Agency intends to focus virtually all its efforts, financial resources, and energies on the revitalization of the Downtown Area. This 'total commitment' effort for the Downtown Area *will include both non-housing activities...and housing activities*. It is anticipated that this program will help transform High Street...from a slightly run-down commercial area with a commuter rail station that closes up at 6 pm on weekdays, to a more vibrant, full service downtown where people live, work, (play) and shop into the...evenings and on weekends."

Twenty percent (20%) of the agency's funds are set aside to increase and improve affordable housing and the rest are for meeting other non-housing goals—namely economic development, especially in the High Street Corridor.

Supporting the arts center to give it a chance to bring people to High Street in the evenings and on weekends is critical to meeting three of the four goals in the adopted plan. Just because it is taking longer than one-and-a-half years to become a more frequent "night spot" for entertainment does not mean that we abandon it. What could be more important to night and weekend usage than entertainment? The arts center has already gotten critical acclaim in the region and is poised to increase attendance further. Now is not the time to pull the plug!

The adopted plan is full of references about why it IS important to spend agency money on High Street and in the downtown area. Indeed, it was an appropriate use of agency funds when we loaned the prior theatre owner (Larry Janss) funds to support its renovation in 2001-2003—which he paid back.

With a locally historic theatre on our own High Street (the first theatre in eastern Ventura County!) it would have been irresponsible to allow the theatre to be converted to some other kind of use—right when the long-awaited High Street revitalization is at the threshold of starting to happen. Yet that was where the venue was headed, before the agency agreed to purchase it from Janss.

Redevelopment agencies, by design, were created to take risks and leverage investments—to assist with economic development in areas that have had difficulty staying economically vibrant. When an opportunity purchase like this comes along, redevelopment agencies are the only entities that can afford to take the initial risks that will pay dividends later. It has taken since 1993 for interest from the private sector for agency properties on the south side of High Street. In fact, a developer did not show serious interest until after Janss renovated and reopened the theatre. I do not believe this is a coincidence!

Moorpark old-timers know that what the required historic evaluation of the theatre stated (in 2002) was true: that in the 1930's "Moorpark was the only town in the east county to boast a theater. The Moorpark Theatre...provided entertainment not just to local residents but to the nearby communities of Simi Valley, Somis, Camarillo, and Thousand Oaks." It is important to continue to embrace this history and give the arts center a chance to thrive on High Street—it is the one destination that can be the catalyst for other renovations and revitalization.

Council/agency members voted 4-0 to purchase the theatre on July 13, 2005 (The Mayor was absent). Similarly, four of the five councilmembers/agency members voted to support the arts center again on April 26, 2006, with a minimum three-year commitment, by hiring a professional general manager **with theatrical experience** to "raise the bar" by producing a yearly season of higher quality shows and events than could be achieved through rentals to assorted groups, without any professional oversight, as had occurred for almost a year since the purchase of the theatre. The mayor dissented in this vote.

When we voted on these items, we knew in advance that additional financial support would be needed to support theatre operations beyond what revenues would come from ticket and concession sales. To suggest otherwise now is short-sighted.

While the Mayor is entitled to his opinion, I believe it is both unfair and misleading for him to suggest that money spent on the theatre is "at the expense of local families who are trying to make ends meet" and that the Redevelopment Agency "should not continue down the path blindly while people live in substandard housing, wear substandard clothing and miss meals."

Any support for the arts center is not at the expense of poor people in Moorpark. In fact, the city/agency has made a major commitment to those who are most vulnerable by committing funds (about \$10,000,000) for a design and construction project to build the Ruben Castro Human Services Center, a one-stop service center to assist those who are less fortunate and need help making ends meet. By June 30, 2008, the city/agency will have spent about \$2M so far and the facility is anticipated to be completed/open by about Summer 2009.

In fiscal years 2006-7 and 2007-8 alone, as of Dec. 13, 2007, the agency has already purchased seven (7) properties to use to increase/improve Moorpark's affordable housing stock, spending \$2,928,286. This does not count other properties previously purchased and being constructed or renovated for the same purpose. In 2006-7 Moorpark spent its \$1.7 million budget for such acquisitions and to date has already exceeded the 2007-8 budget (\$1.88 million) by about \$108,000 with a full half year to go.

True, the arts center does not fully pay for itself. But neither do a number of other worthy endeavors that the city/agency financially supports. As a maturing city, Moorpark needs to become a more full-service city, even while exploring revenue enhancement options to address potential budget challenges.

That is why the council/agency has consistently voted to continue to support spending public money, for example, to (1) improve/maintain Moorpark's bus system by making it easier for residents to use and having more convenient and frequent service; (2) operate and maintain one of the finest active adult (senior) centers in the region; (3) allow youth sports leagues to rent sport fields at rates much below what it would typically cost to rent them; and (4) other services too numerous to mention.

I do not begrudge these other programs or activities the funds with which we support them, even though none of those named "pay the full cost for themselves." Should Moorpark look for additional revenues to support such programs, including the arts center? Absolutely!

But let's not pick on the fledgling arts center, as if it is the only program that doesn't pay for itself—especially before the arts center has been given a reasonable chance to succeed, and especially when its success will help to meet three of the four goals in the agency's current adopted Implementation Plan.

The relatively small amount of recent financial support for the arts center pales in comparison to the ongoing and upcoming expenditures of greater than \$13 million to support affordable housing and the Human Services Center previously noted.

The facts are that the City, acting as the Agency, has spent more than \$17 million in additional dollars toward improving the Agency's "Project Area" since 1989 for affordable housing, economic development, public works improvements, and community facilities. All of these investments, including for the arts center, are good for Moorpark.

Dr. Roseann Mikos is a Moorpark City Councilmember, Moorpark Redevelopment Agency Member, and a 27-year Moorpark Resident. She can be reached at rmikos@ci.moorpark.ca.us.