

Docket Item # 7  
SPECIAL USE PERMIT #2003-0111

Planning Commission Meeting  
February 3, 2004

**ISSUE:** Consideration of a request for a special use permit amendment to allow an intensification of theater uses and for the reduction of required parking.

**APPLICANT:** Old Town Theater, LLC  
By Duncan W. Blair, attorney

**LOCATION:** 815 ½ King Street

**ZONE:** CD/Commercial Downtown Zone

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**PLANNING COMMISSION ACTION, FEBRUARY 3, 2004:** By unanimous consent, the Planning Commission deferred the request.

Reason: The applicant requested the deferral.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:** Staff recommends **approval** subject to compliance with all applicable codes and ordinance and the permit conditions in Section III of this report.



**I. DISCUSSION:**

REQUEST

The applicant, Old Town Theater, LLC, requests special use permit approval to allow an intensification of the theater use (amusement enterprise) and for a reduction of required parking at 815 ½ King Street.

SITE DESCRIPTION

The subject property is one lot of record with approximately 41 feet of frontage on King Street, 100 feet of depth and a total lot area of approximately 4,100 square feet. The site is developed with the Old Town Theater and is located in the Old and Historic Alexandria District.

SURROUNDING USES

The surrounding area is a mix of retail, office, and residential uses. There are a number of restaurant in this block of King Street including Café Salsa, Bittersweet, Siam 815 (closed for renovation), Asian Bistro, and Austin Grill. Immediately to the east of the theater is the six story building recently approved for residential condominiums (SUP#2002-0082).

HISTORY

The theater was constructed in 1922 and was used as a dance hall and then a movie theater during its early years of operation. On May 25, 1976, City Council granted Special Use Permit #1057 to the National Puppet Center for the operation of an amusement enterprise (puppet theater). That use never began operation and the special use permit expired. Instead, a movie theater operated at the site for 25 years. On May 13, 2000, City Council granted Special Use Permit #2000-0033 for the operation of a live theater to include musicals, comedies, and dramas, and for a parking reduction. The theater has been vacant since last year. The applicant recently acquired Old Town Theater, Inc. and anticipates to reopen in the near future.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The applicant proposes to expand the activities at the theater to create a community venue for entertainment, culture, and education. The applicant anticipates that the theater will host the following activities: films (including midnight movies), music, sporting events, lectures, occasional live theater production, educational and community outreach activities, and private special events for businesses, organizations, and individuals who may want to rent the facility (see attached “Summary Business Plan”). In addition, the applicant proposes to offer more of a variety of concessions items including hot dogs and sandwiches, and proposes to offer on-premise beer, wine, and mixed drinks.

Specific aspects of the operation are as follows:

- # Seats: The applicant proposes 470 seats, which includes 228 main floor theater seats, 181 balcony seats, and 61 moveable seats both for handicapped patrons and seats located in the “Richmond Room,” which is a small lobby area on the second floor. The room will not increase the theater occupancy, but is proposed to be used to serve patrons utilizing the theater facilities. Seating is not proposed in the concessions area. A total of 460 seats were provided by the previous operator and approved in the prior SUP.
- Hours: The applicant proposes to have the theater available for operation seven days a week from 7:30 a.m. to 2:00 a.m. The long hours will provide the flexibility to allow for early morning meetings, lectures, or other events, afternoon matinees, evening movies and performances, and midnight movies. See applicant’s attached “Weekly Program Schedule”, which shows a sample schedule of anticipated events during a week’s time. Because of the variety of events proposed to occur at the theater, the applicant requests the flexibility to offer the same hours for sales of beer, wine, and mixed drinks. The prior operator proposed evening hours of operation generally between 4:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m., however, the hours were not a condition of the special use permit.
- Attendance: It is anticipated that the Old Town Theater will be attended by 150 to 200 patrons for each performance. The number of performances each day will vary depending upon the day of the week and schedule of planned activities.
- Restaurant: As there is not a full service kitchen located on the premises, the applicant proposes to offer a limited menu of concession items including hot dogs, sandwiches, refreshments, and requests approval for the sale of on-premise beer, wine, and mixed drinks. Food and beverage service will be offered to patrons at the theater for a performance, event, or private function. The applicant also proposes to offer the same food service to the public during lunch and dinner hours when the theater is not otherwise scheduled for an event, and anticipates showing news or other programming to the general public in the theater. The applicant does not propose a designated seating area for consuming food and drink, but anticipates that patrons will take food and refreshments to their theater seats or will take it out of the premises to consume elsewhere.

- Employees: The theater will employ on a full or part time basis approximately 25 people working in two or more shifts. Generally, there will be five employees on site at any given time: a manager, two concession attendants, one usher, one box office attendant and one audio visual/lighting specialist.
- Trash: The type of trash and garbage generated by the movie theater will mainly consist of paper products used in connection with the preparation of the limited food prepared by the theater's concession stand. The applicant anticipates two cans of trash each day generated each day. Trash is proposed to be collected twice a week.
- Litter: The applicant does not anticipate that litter will be a problem; however, the theater staff will self-police the adjacent public right-of-way.
- Facade: The applicant proposes to renovate the facade of the theater, which will require approval by the Board of Architectural Review.
- Equipment: State of the art audio visual equipment will be installed to support the proposed activities.

The uses that the applicant proposes at the theater may involve significant Building Code requirements. The applicant has met with Code Enforcement staff, and is aware of potential Code issues. The applicant is also working with the Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control on its regulations for the alcohol sales at the theater.

#### PARKING

Section 8-200 (A)(8) of the zoning ordinance requires a theater with 470 seats to provide 118 parking spaces. As the property includes no land for parking, the applicant requests a parking reduction to provide no off-street parking.

In May of 2000 the City Council granted SUP# 2000-0033 to the applicant's predecessor, allowing a live performance theater and a parking reduction. The applicant was required to subsidize parking for patrons for the amount of \$1. The current applicant also requests a parking reduction for the current application intensifying the theater use, and justifies its request by stating the following:

1. The reestablishment of the Old Town Theater as an entertainment center on King Street is an essential component to the continued and future commercial vitality of the central business district. The entertainment use will assist in the retention of existing uses and encourage new restaurant and retail businesses. The theater was constructed without parking and it is impossible for the applicant to provide parking on site.

2. Because the property is in the Central Business District and contains less than 10,000 square feet of land, the building could be converted to a use, such as retail, office or restaurant, and be exempt from the requirement to provide parking.
3. There is an ample supply of public and private off-street parking facilities in the immediate area to accommodate the patrons of the Old Town Theater.
4. The Old Town Theater has an informal arrangement with the owner and operator of the Cameron Alfred Street garage to keep the facility open for the hours the theater is open.

According to the applicant, it is not feasible to provide the required parking because the property is located in the fully developed downtown urban Old Town area, where little, if any, land is available for surface parking. Additionally, the applicant states that it is neither financially nor practically feasible to provide parking. The applicant specifically maintains that it is not feasible for it to operate the theater and pay for parking and have the business be economically viable.

#### ZONING

The subject property is located in the CD/Commercial downtown zone. Section 4-503(A) of the zoning ordinance allows an amusement enterprise in the CD zone only with a special use permit.

#### MASTER PLAN

The proposed use is consistent with the Old Town small area plan chapter of the Master Plan which designates the property for commercial downtown use.

## **II. STAFF ANALYSIS:**

Staff does not object to the proposed intensification of theater uses at the Old Town Theater at 815½ King Street. The theater is an important feature of the community, and staff supports efforts to fill the space with an active use. A vacant theater in the middle of Old Town is a waste of valuable community entertainment space. In addition, a vacant theater discourages street vitality and inhibits economic development in the area. Staff supports the owner's efforts to be competitive with larger theater and movie houses in the region by offering a variety of functions and entertainment possibilities.

Although staff is supportive of the variety of events that are proposed at the venue, and wants to support the applicant's efforts by allowing flexibility, staff is very concerned about the potential for frequent late night events and activities in an area where there are residential uses in close proximity, especially with the addition of alcohol service. Part of what the applicant is requesting is the potential to have closed circuit television sporting events or midnight movies. Although the applicant states that he does not anticipate having late night events several times a week, popular

late-night events could cause disruption given the large capacity of the theater. Therefore, staff recommends a limitation of the hours for events and alcohol service to provide more certainty and predictability with regard to the late night hours. Specifically, staff recommends that the theater be required to close at 12:00 midnight, Sunday through Thursday, and be allowed to remain open until 2:00 a.m. only on Friday and Saturday. Staff also recommends that the hours of alcohol sales be limited to one hour before the closing hour. Staff also recommends a one year review to ensure that these limitations are sufficient.

In regard to parking, staff recommends that the condition requiring that patrons be reimbursed \$1.00 for parking be continued. Staff understands the applicant's justification for its request for a parking reduction, and while staff believes that the applicant should not be required to provide free parking for its patrons, staff believes that it is reasonable, and consistent with the previous two uses of the theater, to require the applicant to subsidize a portion of the cost of the off-street parking for theater patrons. Staff also required that the applicant's employees who drive not park on the street.

With these conditions, staff recommends approval of the special use permit.

### **III. PERMIT CONDITIONS:**

Staff recommends **approval** subject to compliance with all applicable codes and ordinances and the following conditions:

1. The special use permit shall be granted to the applicant only or to any business or entity in which the applicant has a controlling interest. (P&Z) (SUP#2000-0033)
2. The applicant shall post signs directing patrons to the availability of parking at a public parking garage located within a two block radius of 815 ½ King Street at which public parking garage the applicant shall subsidize parking at least to the extent of \$1 off the regular price for patrons. The applicant shall submit annually to the Director of Planning and Zoning a copy of the lease or other agreement by which it provides this subsidy. (P&Z) (SUP#2000-0033)
3. The applicant shall require that its employees who drive to work use off-street parking. (P&Z) (SUP#2000-0033)
4. **CONDITION AMENDED BY STAFF: On site alcohol service is permitted until one hour before the theater's closing hour. No alcohol sales are permitted.** (P&Z) (SUP#2000-0033)
5. No amplified sound shall be audible at the property line. (P&Z) (SUP#2000-0033)

6. **CONDITION AMENDED BY STAFF:** The applicant shall ~~consult with~~ **contact** the Crime Prevention Unit of the Alexandria Police Department at 703-838-4520 regarding a security survey for the business and shall schedule a robbery awareness program for all employees. (Police) (SUP#2000-0033)
7. The Director of Planning and Zoning shall review the special use permit after it has been operational for one year and shall docket the matter for consideration by the Planning Commission and City Council if (a) there have been documented violations of the permit conditions, (b) the director has received a request from any person to docket the permit for review, or (c) the director has determined that there are problems with the operation of the use and that new or revised conditions are needed. (P&Z) (SUP#2000-0033)
8. **CONDITION ADDED BY STAFF:** The hours of operation for the public shall be limited to 7:30 a.m. to 12:00 midnight Sunday through Thursday and 7:30 a.m. to 2:00 a.m. on Friday and Saturday. (P&Z)
9. **CONDITION ADDED BY STAFF:** The applicant shall conduct employee training session on an ongoing basis, including as part of any employee orientation, to discuss all SUP provisions and requirements. (P&Z)
10. **CONDITION ADDED BY STAFF:** Kitchen equipment shall not be cleaned outside, nor shall any cooking residue be washed into the streets, alleys, or storm sewers. (T&ES)
11. **CONDITION ADDED BY STAFF:** The applicant shall control odors, smoke and any other air pollution from operations at the site and prevent them from leaving the property or becoming a nuisance to neighboring properties, as determined by the Department of Transportation and Environmental Services. (T&ES)
12. **CONDITION ADDED BY STAFF:** All loudspeakers shall be prohibited from the exterior of the building and no amplified sound shall be audible at the property line. (T&ES)

**STAFF:** Eileen Fogarty, Director, Department of Planning and Zoning;  
Barbara Ross, Deputy Director;  
Valerie Peterson, Urban Planner.

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**Staff Note:** In accordance with section 11-506(c) of the zoning ordinance, construction or operation shall be commenced and diligently and substantially pursued within 18 months of the date of granting of a special use permit by City Council or the special use permit shall become void.



**IV. CITY DEPARTMENT COMMENTS:**

Legend: C - code requirement R - recommendation S - suggestion F - finding

Transportation & Environmental Services:

- C-1 The applicant shall comply with the City of Alexandria's Noise Control Code, Title 11, Chapter 5, which sets the maximum permissible noise level as measured at the property line.
- R-1 Kitchen equipment shall not be cleaned outside, nor shall any cooking residue be washed into the streets, alleys, or storm sewers.
- R-2 The applicant shall control odors, smoke and any other air pollution from operations at the site and prevent them from leaving the property or becoming a nuisance to neighboring properties, as determined by the Department of Transportation and Environmental Service.
- R-3 All loudspeakers shall be prohibited from the exterior of the building and no amplified sound shall be audible at the property line.

Code Enforcement:

- F-1 Inspection reports from 2003 indicate business is closed and not in operation.
- F-2 The scope of the project is broad and requires further clarification by the applicant as to the layout, specific uses and functions of the project. The applicant should meet with Code Enforcement in order to provide more specific details and interior layout proposals in order to properly address Code concerns in advance.
- C-1 Alterations to the existing structure must comply with the current edition of the Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC).
- C-2 A fire prevention code permit is required for the proposed operation. An egress plan showing fixture location, aisles and exit doors shall be submitted for review with the permit application.
- C-3 Alterations to the existing structure and/or installation and/or altering of equipment therein requires a building permit. Four sets of plans, bearing the signature and seal

of a design professional registered in the Commonwealth of Virginia, must accompany the written application. The plans must include all dimensions, construction alterations details, kitchen equipment, electrical, plumbing, and mechanical layouts and schematics.

- C-4 Required exits, parking, and accessibility for persons with disabilities must be provided to the building.
- C-5 The following code requirements apply where food preparation results in the development of grease laden vapors:
  - (a) All cooking surfaces, kitchen exhaust systems, grease removal devices and hoods are required to be protected with an approved automatic fire suppression system.
  - (b) A grease interceptor is required where there is drainage from fixtures and equipment with grease-laden waste located in food preparation areas of restaurants. Food waste grinders can not discharge to the building drainage system through a grease interceptor.
- C-6 A rodent control plan shall be submitted to this office for review and approval prior to occupancy. This plan shall consist of the following:
  - (a) Measures to be taken to control the placement of litter on site and the trash storage and pickup schedule.
  - (b) How food stuffs will be stored on site.
  - (c) Rodent baiting plan.

Health Department:

- C-1 An Alexandria Health Department Permit is reacquired for all regulated facilities. Permits are non-transferable.
- C-2 This facility must meet current Alexandria City Code requirements for food establishments. Contact Environmental Health at 703-838-4400 Ext.255 to arrange a “change of ownership” inspection.
- C-3 If change to the facility are to be dine, five sets of plans must be submitted to and approved by this department prior to construction. Plans must comply with the Alexandria City Code. Title 11, Chapter 2, Food and Food Establishment. There is a \$135.00 fee for review of plans for food facilities.

- C-4 Permits must be obtained prior to operation.
- C-5 The facility must comply with the Alexandria City Code, Title 11, Chapter 10, Smoking Prohibitions.
- C-6 Certified Food Mangers must be on duty during all hours of operation
- C-7 Restrooms, including those in common areas, serving the restaurant, are to be meet Alexandria City Code, Title 11, Chapter 2 requirements.
- C-8 This facility is currently operating as Old Town Theater under Alexandria Health Dept. permit, issued to Old Town Theater, Inc
- C-9 Provide a menu or list of foods to be handled at this facility to the Health Department Prior to opening.

Police Department:

- R-1 The applicant is to contact the Crime Prevention Unit of the Alexandria Police Department at 703-838-4520 regarding a security survey for the business. This is to be completed prior to opening for business.
- R-2 The applicant is to contact the Crime Prevention Unit of the Alexandria Police Department at 703-838-4520 regarding a robbery awareness program for all employees.
- R-3 Recommend “ABC On” license only. If ABC off” is approved we recommend the following conditions:
  - 1. Beer or wine coolers may be sold only in 4-packs or bottles of more than 40 fluid ounces. Wine may be sold only in bottles of at least 750 ml or 25.4 ounces. Fortified wine (wine with an alcohol content of 14% or more by volume) may not be sold.
  - 2. That the SUP is reviewed after one year.