



My Turn

Reviving the historic heart of Taos

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The Taos News, 9/13/2012

My wife and I are visiting from a small town in Washington State. Thursday evening, Sept. 6, we had the enjoyable experience of attending a musical event on the Taos Plaza.

It was great seeing the plaza packed with people of all ages enjoying the beautiful evening and great music. It also served as an apt example of the importance of a central meeting place as a venue for drawing people together.

Unfortunately, most often, the plaza is for the most part deserted with little more than a few window shopping tourists. That evening's performance highlights the tremendous potential in seeing the plaza come back to life as a place where the Taos community can come together.

Over the past several years when we've visited Taos, I have noticed that the old movie theater on the plaza remains vacant.

Several years ago, it appeared that there was an effort to revitalize this historic landmark.

Unfortunately, it now appears as if this effort has been abandoned. As many of your readers would know, in small towns across the country, communities are recognizing the value in the redevelopment of abandoned theaters that had once served as a central gathering spot for the community. This has happened in Mount Vernon, Washington, where we now live. In Mount Vernon, the Lincoln Theater, built in the early '20s, had fallen into disrepair and finally closed. It sat vacant for several years.

Then in recognizing its potential, a diverse group of interests, including city and county government, community groups, downtown businesses, and private individuals turned what had become a liability into a very valuable asset. The city of Mount Vernon received several grants to purchase and rehab the facility and subsequently leased it to a nonprofit foundation which now runs the theater.

Over a period of more than 10 years, in a step by step fashion, the theater was restored and revitalized. More recent improvements have included reproducing the original marquee and sign, which now stands above the Lincoln Theater.

You may find it interesting to visit the theater's website www.lincoltheatre.org to see what's been accomplished as well as the breadth of activities that now occur at this historic site. In addition to many practical benefits that have come to the downtown and larger community as a result of this project, one key result has been the way that this effort has drawn diverse elements of the community together.

Perhaps the Taos community is at a cross road. Taos can choose to abandon the plaza and historical district, and look to urban sprawl on the outskirts of the community.

Or Taos can commit to the kind of community building effort that would be highlighted by bringing life back to your theater on the plaza. While there would be many obstacles to overcome, and while you may have other facilities that can be said to meet the community's needs for space, they are not at the historic heart of Taos.

Jere LaFollette, who grew up in New Mexico, now lives in Mount Vernon, Washington State.