

# Fox Theater eyed for city purchase

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**WATSONVILLE** — The historic Fox Theatre and the adjacent Masonic Hall may become city property if a group of cultural activists gets its way.

Led by former Mayor Ann Soldo, the group will ask the City Council Nov. 24 to look into financing the purchase of the two downtown buildings, possibly through a citywide bond issue.

Hank Garcia, owner of the Fox Theatre, has been considering splitting the 1,084-seat facility into three movie theaters. His plan suggests leaving the 758-seat downstairs auditorium intact and dividing the balcony into two theaters of 137 and 111 seats.

When Garcia presented his proposal to the council in June, it was met with a chorus of boos from arts supporters, who would like to

preserve the Fox Theatre's historic integrity as well as its acoustics. The Fox is one of the largest auditoriums in the county and regularly showcases such events as the Santa Cruz Symphony and the Watsonville Band.

But most of the time, the Fox is used as a Spanish-language movie theater, which, Garcia says, makes him the most revenue.

Soldo said she had "no idea what it would cost" to purchase the two buildings. "What we'd ask the council to do is look into the cost estimate. The buildings would have to be appraised."

The first step, she added, is to "get everyone in the community involved. We need a wide base of support for this."

The organizers of the project are banking on heavy support from throughout the Pajaro Valley and the Aptos area. Among the committee members are Pajaro Valley Schools Superintendent Jim Baker, Cultural

Council activist Ethlyn Miller, Watsonville Band leader Ed Pio and retired businessman Don Cooley.

Soldo said the organizers want the council to consider a bond, which would be placed on the June ballot for approval. For it to succeed, two-thirds of the city's electorate has to support the measure. In addition, private fund-raisers are taking place.

Soldo said the theater could be used by Watsonville High School for a variety of events, including drama, music and debates. The Masonic Hall could be used for community meetings. She also envisions ethnic groups putting on shows in the theater.

While there are many events that could fill the auditorium, Soldo said the group hasn't ruled out a lease-back agreement with Garcia, allowing him to continue to run Spanish-language films there during the week.