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Cultural groups may buy Watsonville's Fox Theater

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Santa Cruz County cultural groups have 90 days to work out a deal to buy the Fox Theater in Watsonville.

If they can't meet that deadline, theater owner Hank Garcia will divide the theater into three smaller auditoriums so he can show three movies at once — a change which would also reduce the practicality of using the theater for musical performances.

A few years ago, area cultural groups discovered the Fox Theater was not only the largest of its kind in the county, but also that it offered good acoustics for musical performances. Garcia agreed to rent out his theater 12 times a year for such performances, and the symphony, the Watsonville Band and other groups have taken advantage of the unique performing hall.

But it's the moviegoers who really support the theater, Garcia said last night, and the movie business has been poor recently. To attract more customers, he wants to divide the balcony of the theater into two theaters. Leaving the main

auditorium intact, Garcia could show three movies at once.

The theater now seats 1,084. If Garcia splits the balcony, the theater's total seating would be 1,006, but only the 758 seats in the main auditorium would be available for large events. The division of the balcony is also expected to adversely affect the acoustics in the theater.

Garcia has applied for a permit to make the changes in the balcony, and although the city staff agreed Garcia didn't need City Council approval for the changes, the matter was brought to the council last night.

The council heard a discussion of the future of the Fox during its meeting as the Redevelopment Agency because the Fox, at Main and Maple streets, is in the city's downtown redevelopment area.

The council decided not to

get involved, at least not yet, despite a plea for the city to delay granting Garcia's permit for 90 days and for the city to agree to buy the theater, then lease it back to Garcia so he could continue to show movies.

These ideas came from Rowland Rebele, president of the Santa Cruz Symphony Association.

"I'd like very much to save the Fox as it is," Rebele said. "My whole motivation is to save this valuable cultural resource."

"The Fox has proven to be the best place in Santa Cruz County for our county symphony to play," he said.

Rebele said he had thought Garcia might be able to divide the balcony with movable walls that could be taken down or moved aside for the larger events. But Rebele found out it's next to impossible to soundproof the theaters with portable walls.

Rebele asked the council to buy the theater and lease it back to Garcia. "A 'Save the Fox' campaign might just work," Rebele said, explaining that the symphony and other cultural groups would lead a

drive to raise the money to buy the theater. In essence, the Fox would be purchased with private donations, but the city would take title because it would provide Garcia with tax benefits, Rebele said.

Garcia said the arts groups have known for two or three years that he wanted to divide the theater, so they had plenty of time to work out a deal to buy it. He has reportedly offered to sell the Fox for \$1.9 million, although Garcia said today he has not set a price.

"It's not that I just sprung this on them," Garcia said. "I've got problems with the Fox Theater right now," Garcia said. "There's a lot of stiff competition."

"Cultural programs are great," he said, but he said he's been having trouble filling his theater on a regular basis, and that's what really counts. He reminded the council he needs to cater to his customers.

"We have a blue-collar town," he said, "not a Carmel-by-the-Sea."

Garcia said he objected to the pressure put on him by Rebele, yet said he would consider holding off making any changes in the theater for 90 days. But he said he wants his permit now, so that if an offer to buy the theater doesn't materialize, he won't have to wait any longer to move ahead.

Before committing to a delay, Garcia said he wanted to consult his attorney, who wasn't available last night. He would also like to get his attorney's advice before determining whether it would even be advantageous for him if the city bought the theater and leased it back to him.

Although Rebele had asked the council to require Garcia to hold up any renovations for 90 days, the council said Garcia's word was good enough, and that there was no reason to prevent him from getting a permit for the work.

Mayor Betty Murphy told Garcia, "it's in your ball park. I hope your attorney is in a good mood."