

Cinema 9 owners plan all-new Riverfront theater

Movie Theaters

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SANTA CRUZ — The 750,000 or so Santa Cruz Cinema 9 movie goers who waited in long lines last year to experience the latest movies in a high-tech theater with neon flood lighting will get to spread out to a couple new screens this summer.

Signature Theatres of Oakland, owner of Cinema 9, signed a lease deal for the Riverfront Cinema space in the Galleria. Terms of the lease were not disclosed.

United Artists, the Riverfront tenant, has been trying to shed itself of its outmoded theaters in the county, including a lease on the Capitola 41st Avenue Playhouse, and the buildings housing the Rio Theatre and Del

Mar Theatre in Santa Cruz and the Aptos Twin.

Phil Harris, Signature Theatres president, said he plans to shut down the Riverfront soon for a complete makeover. Renovations will include better viewing, sound and seating facilities. The cinema will remain a two-screen facility, but it will be "a luxury environment ... with all the bells and whistles. We're just completely gutting it and remodeling it."

Harris said the renovations should be complete in the spring.

While people have questioned how many theaters the community can support, Harris definitely believes the market is healthy.

Most of the older UA theaters in the county have steadily lost business in recent

years. But at Cinema 9 it has been a field of dreams.

The state-of-the-art cinema complex, with lines of patrons that routinely wind around the corner, is a good example of the industry's successful makeover.

The numbers tallied by the city's Redevelopment Agency speak for themselves.

Ticket sales for Santa Cruz theaters were about \$1.83 million before Cinema 9 opened. By the end of fiscal year 1996-97, they had jumped more than \$3.73 million to more than \$5.56 million. The hundreds of thousands of people buying movie tickets last year were also spending money elsewhere downtown.

"Impressive," said Ceil Cirillo, director of the Redevelopment Agency.

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The Riverfront, just a block away, can be considered an expansion in the lucrative Santa Cruz market rather than a new market.

Harris said he has considered options at other facilities in the county, but has not reached a decision.

"We're primarily committed to the Santa Cruz city marketplace."

Cirillo said the move should also be good for existing restaurants in the Galleria.

"I'm really gratified that he's going to be taking on two existing theaters rather than looking to construct some additional ones," Cirillo said. "That fills a space and meets a need that he's identified."

Signature Theatres presently has 18 cinemas in Northern California and Hawaii.