

ALGER THEATER PROJECT

Friends of the Alger Theater (FOTAT), a volunteer driven, non-profit community-based organization comprised of neighborhood residents and businesses was founded in 1983 to address the decay and deterioration encroaching the neighborhood and the historic significance of the Alger Theater located at 16451 E. Warren Avenue on Detroit's far east side. Through diligent and extensive grass roots fundraising efforts, FOTAT purchased the Alger Theater in 1986. FOTAT's goals are to refurbish and reopen the Alger Theater as a viable community performing arts and neighborhood movie theater center. The Alger Theater will serve as a catalyst for the continuous revitalization of the surrounding neighborhood and adjacent businesses by promoting local creative arts and stimulating local economic activity.

The mission of Friends of the Alger Theater is to enhance the quality of life and encourage economic revitalization of the community through cultural and recreational programming by fully utilizing the historic Alger Theater.

From its opening to the public in 1935 until its closing in 1985, the "stately art deco movie house" known as the Alger Theater provided Detroit eastside residents with artistic and cultural enrichment. The 12,000 sq. ft., 800 seat theater was convenient, affordable and a state of the art facility- offering family friendly live performances and motion picture features. Neighboring merchants along East Warren Avenue were patronized by theater goers creating a vibrant, thriving community.

Although today the Alger Theater marquee is lit daily to announce community news – block club meetings, births, graduations, anniversaries, etc., the lobby and auditorium remain dark and uninhabited. Friends of the Alger Theater (FOTAT) have kept the significance of the theater prominent in the minds of the community by offering a broad range of yearly off site arts and cultural programming events. Grass roots funding support has financed minor repairs on the theater. Major restoration needs have not been met, however.

To assess the potential impact of the Alger Theater restoration on the total revitalization of the community, FOTAT hosted a future visioning meeting. Community stakeholders stated restoration of the theater as a community arts center will renew residential and commercial investment in the target area and facilitate access to family friendly entertainment and recreation options.

In a recent Michigan Future, Inc. report, "Revitalizing Michigan's Central Cities: A Vision and Framework for Action", attracting a "creative class" is one of the four unique attributes defined as making central cities important to Michigan's future. The creative class is defined as educators, college students, artists and bohemians who bring new energy, vitality and creativity to their communities.

They are also cited as a major source of new stores, restaurants, clubs and galleries in urban neighborhoods in which they settle. Arts and culture programming at the Alger Theater is a magnet to attract this type of investment.

Since purchasing the Alger Theater almost 20 years ago, FOTAT has preserved the structure by conducting grassroots fundraising to support ongoing maintenance and emergency repairs. Given the need for more extensive repairs and restoration work, use of the theater has been severely limited in scope.

Having operated solely as a volunteer driven organization FOTAT will hire a project manager and a community development/outreach specialist to launch the restoration initiative. The project manager will facilitate planning and manage the scope and phases of the theater's restoration. The community development/outreach specialist will serve as a liaison to FOTAT, establishing community partnerships with neighborhood associations, business owners, developers and community stakeholders such as schools, cultural arts, civic and faith-based institutions.

A community/commercial development assessment to determine and plan for long term theater programming needs and business plan is a part of the proposed project. Funding will be used to initiate the first phase of the restoration.

To encourage ongoing support for the restoration and reuse of the theater, the project includes a detailed marketing and fund development plan to garner financial support. An appeal to a major Foundation will be made to obtain lead funding to attract other major donors for long term support and sustainability of the project.

A successful Alger Theater project is expected to:

- Expand partners awareness/interest in the Alger Theater and FOTAT membership
- Expand and enhance community arts and cultural programming
- Establish a long-term professional management and maintenance plan for the Alger Theater
- Curtail further deterioration/decay of the theater
- Expand FOTAT's membership, donor and volunteer base
- Increase fund development revenue
- Stimulate capital improvements and commercial and residential investment
- Create employment opportunities
- Open the theater for use and performances

The Alger project will provide tangible evidence to community stakeholders - residents, business owners and institutions that the commitment, dedication and perseverance of a small group of volunteers can result in positive

change for a community. It is expected that the project will inspire community development groups and stakeholders to create strategic alliances to pursue delayed projects and launch new initiatives that contribute to the reinvestment in improving the quality of life in the community.

Since its inception, the ultimate goal of FOTAT has been the restoration and reopening of the Alger Theater. FOTAT has successfully established programming partnerships with local and regional organizations to produce and present on and off-site events that expose the community to a diverse range of arts and culture. The programming has been a reminder to area artists and patrons of the theater's importance and need in the community.

FOTAT's current goals include expanding partnerships and programming to include arts education, after school and senior programming, and the development of a dance and theater group. The restoration and reuse of the Alger Theater will enable FOTAT to realize the totality of its mission – to enhance the quality of life through arts and culture and encourage community economic revitalization. As the landmark anchor tenant on East Warren Avenue, the Alger Theater will provide a venue to establish broad appeal arts and culture programming and attract renewed commercial and residential investment.

As a volunteer organization with very limited resources, FOTAT purchased the Alger Theater through strategic grass roots fundraising efforts. FOTAT is adept at managing its limited resources to fulfill its organizational mission. Realizing the theater marquee presented an opportunity to communicate important news to the community and generate revenue, FOTAT raised the necessary funds to repair and light the marquee. The marquee is now an ongoing fundraising vehicle for FOTAT and reminder that the theater will again open to the public.

Comprised of a diverse group of volunteers - ethnically and professionally, FOTAT has demonstrated its ability to provide quality arts and culture programming, attract partnerships to expand the capacity of the theater and maintain structural integrity of the theater. Restoration of the Alger Theater will further allow FOTAT to attract new partners for the comprehensive commercial revitalization of East Warren Avenue.

In addition to individual contributions, membership dues, historic tax credits and special event fundraising, FOTAT will seek major funding dollars from a host of foundations and organizations. The following is but a short list of potential funders FOTAT plan to approach: Kresge Foundation, Skillman Foundation, McGregor Foundation, Hudson Webber Foundation, the Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan, and ArtServe of Michigan

Building upon existing collaborations and partnerships, FOTAT will sustain the Alger Theater renovation, by enhancing and expanding use of the facility.

Lease and rental of the facility for performances will be expanded for meetings, classes, training, workshops and special events to generate operating revenue. Private art organizations, The Detroit Public Schools, Department of Recreation, Public Library and Wayne County Community College have expressed an interest in leasing the theater for graduations, arts education and workshops, literary symposiums, rehearsals and performances.

As a part of its annual fund development/business development plan, FOTAT will expand its membership categories to include corporate, small business and non-profit groups. Presenting corporate sponsors will be engaged to underwrite touring performances.

These funding sources will be supplemented by event ticket sales, fee for services by concessionaires and vendors. One of the adjacent storefront offices will be leased to an area artists group.

Once renovated and open for performances and artistic programming the Alger Theater will serve as a catalyst for the continuous revitalization of the surrounding neighborhood and adjacent businesses by promoting local creative arts and stimulating local economic activity.