

Bridge and Beyond
P.O. Box 164
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Some thoughts on...

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE WITH
THE HOLLYWOOD THEATER

I see the old movie house enjoying a rebirth as a community cultural center. It should serve not just AuSable Forks or even the Town of Jay, but the entire area: from as far west as Wilmington, south as Keene, east as Keeseville, and at least as far north as the Towns of Black Brook and Ausable—in short, the region immediately outside the cultural arc formed by Lake Placid, Plattsburgh, and Lake Champlain (Westport/Essex).

Rather than brave another likely failed attempt as a commercial venture, the new cultural center (I'd dub it "The AuSable Forks" or simply "The Forks," signifying its role in bringing people together for the common exercise of culture) should be run as a nonprofit enterprise and offer a variety of events and activities, including (but not necessarily limited to):

- *Community theater
- *Local dance and music concerts
- *Performances by traveling professional troupes
- *Old movies, perhaps on a repertory basis
- *Lectures and readings
- *Art exhibits
- *Public meetings, including town meetings
- *Youth programs
- *Adult education/workshops
- *Use by local community groups

Now, I realize that all this sounds rather grandiose for a building that is currently being used to house mattresses! I also understand that the Friends of the North Country may already be at work on achieving at least some aspects of the above vision and may be in the process of applying for one or more grants to get something underway.

But I would like to suggest, if it hasn't been considered already, that such an undertaking be opened up now to include the entire community. For even if grants were obtained and renovation done to get the theater ready for cultural use, there is no guarantee that the interest is there for sustained use of the space. In other words, unlike *Field of Dreams*, if you build it, they may not come!

I'm suggesting that the way to build a theater (ie, a *theater* in the sense of a "cultural force," not just a building) is from the ground up—with people first, then with tools and materials. To create a truly community-oriented cultural center, we should approach all the cultural organizations and culturally relevant community groups in the area for ideas, input, and help.

Here's a short list of groups/institutions, drawing predominantly from Jay:

- *Frog Pond Theater/High Peaks Base Camp
- *J.E.M.S.
- *AuSable Forks Free Library
- *Wells Library (Upper Jay)
- *Literacy Volunteers
- *Arts Council of the North Country
- *Ausable Valley Central School
- *AuSable Forks School
- *Holy Name School (and other church groups)
- *Bridge and Beyond
- *Kiwanis, Rotary Club, etc.

Once you open it up to other communities in the area, I think we'll begin to see a lot of interest. Once groups begin to see the theater as *their* center, the uses will come. Conversely, some of the activities listed above may help spawn groups. For example, I can envision a Film Society forming to organize and sponsor weekly pairings of classic films or other movies hard to find on video.

As the project proceeds, you may want to consider forming a Board of Directors. Here, I would urge you to reach out to as many prominent "names" of people in the arts who have even so much as a part-time connection to the area. Two that spring to mind are the choreographer Rebecca Kelly and the novelist Russell Banks. I'm sure there are many others we could interest.

Finally, I suppose the biggest question that remains to be addressed is how one manages to build a nonprofit organization in a facility that continues to be privately owned. I would be eager to learn more about this aspect from your perspective in obtaining grants for the Friends, just as I know we would be very enthusiastic about working in some capacity to make any part of the vision outlined here a reality.

Respectfully submitted,

Fred Balzac
President, **Bridge and Beyond**