

Keeping the Movies Downtown

by Teresa Gillotti*

Recent trends in the movie exhibition industry emphasize new facilities with 16 or more screens, multiple story stadium seating and digital sound and picture. While these theatre concepts may work well in large metropolitan areas, smaller cities do not have the population or density to support these large developments, nor do such large footprints fit in with downtown plans focusing on creating pedestrian friendly districts with a sense of history and place.

Regardless of the trends, smaller cities and towns still feature viable downtown theatres that provide gathering places and centers of affordable entertainment for all ages. These theatres range from long-running single-screen theatres and newer multiplexes, to non-profit or cooperative theatres and even city-run movie houses. Below are examples of successful theatres in small city downtowns employing a variety of strategies to keep the movie house lights on.

Towne Cinema: Watertown, WI, pop 21,598
Privately Owned and Operated

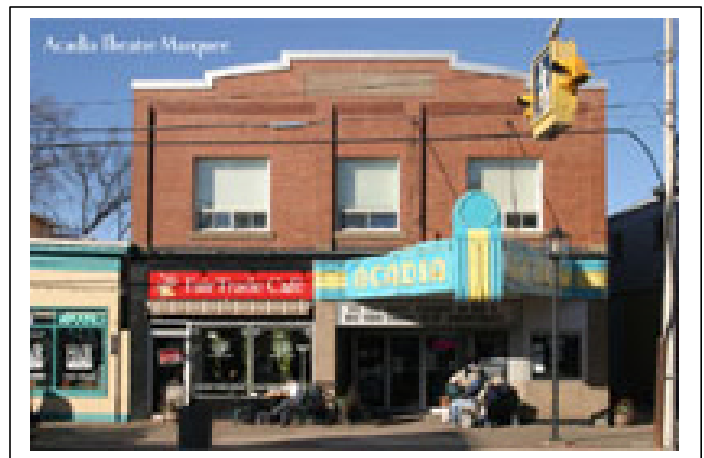
Steve and Dana Lind have owned the Towne Cinema since November 2004, but have been in the film exhibition business for more than 35 years. The secret to success for this 3-screen, first run theatre is catering to the community's needs and maintaining the hometown atmosphere. "We do what the big chains can't do," said Steve Lind. That includes family films on Tuesday mornings, senior screenings on Wednesday mornings, renting out a theatre to a church group on Sundays and making screenings available to schools, teams and other community groups. According to the Linds' agreement, once a movie is booked, they can show it as many times a day as they want. That puts Lind on the phone, trying to attract school groups to movies based on books, like *Lemony Snickett's A Series of Unfortunate Events* and *Because of Winn Dixie* "You have to be more aggressive in smaller towns," he said.

The Linds face competition from a 16-screen theatre in Johnsons Creek, a mere 12 miles from Watertown. However, Lind insists that the Towne Cinema is run differently, arguing that what the Towne may lack in state of the art equipment, it makes up for in accessibility. A family

member is always on site selling tickets, and the theatre itself can be opened up to groups like the boy or girl scouts for a tour of the theatre, an opportunity to learn about the theatre's history and even a glimpse of the projection room.

Acadia Cinema Cooperative: Wolfville, Nova Scotia, pop 3,658. *Cooperatively Owned*

Originally built in 1911, renovation of the theatre was complete in 2004 by the Acadia Cinema Cooperative. This non-profit co-op is comprised of members who purchased shares for \$100 each. The shares provide members with voting rights and the option to redeem the shares at face value after four years. In addition to the shares, the cooperative solicits donations including "buying" a seat in the theatre or a star in the lobby. Other financial assistance comes from the city, which has reduced the property tax rate to that of a residence, as it does with other non-profits in the area. The building itself is co-owned with the neighboring business, Just Us Coffee. This complementary business also runs a café in the street-front part of the building, creating an inviting entrance to both the coffee shop and theatre.



The cooperative makes the facility available to groups for a fee of \$250 per screening or live event. The local non-profit, the Fundy Film Society, is currently booking for all other film groups using the space including family film and university groups. Groups using the theatre provide either paid or volunteer staffing for ticket sales, concessions and other help. Current renters are breaking even on concessions as they strive to make the prices reasonable, said Bill Zimmerman of Acadia Cinema Cooperative.

Flame Theatre: Wells, MN, pop 2,490
City Owned and Operated

The city of Wells considers their theatre part of the recreational facilities provided and maintained by the city. Running the Flame allows the city to provide an affordable entertainment option to families in the area. "It is part of the quality of life here," said Ann Schuster, member of the city's theatre committee and former city council member. Schuster said the job of the city council is to provide services to the community that a normal business cannot. In the case of Wells, it is a first run movie theatre with low ticket and concession prices. Adult admissions run \$3 each and youth under 18 pay \$2 with candy priced at \$.50. The theatre continues to break even. Schuster explains that the Flame benefits as nearby families attend more frequently due to lower ticket prices. In 2004, more than 26,000 tickets were sold. The Flame's major challenge is booking the big movies at a single screen venue. Schuster noted that distribution companies often require guaranteed gross or attendance figures before a bigger movie can be booked. Even with 300 seats, the low prices may not add up to enough to garner big movies limiting programming choices and the powerful draw of big name films.

Creative ideas have resulted in a fund to purchase new sound equipment. The Flame has collaborated with a local high school class to provide local advertising before movies. The class gains filming and editing experience while the fees for advertising help the theatre stay current.

Great Escape Movie Theater: Massillon, Ohio, pop 31,325. *Privately Owned and Operated by a Theatre Chain*

For 10 years, the city of Massillon worked to redevelop an area of downtown many considered a slum. Ideas through the years included building a theme park, a civic arena and a minor league hockey team. In the meantime, the city purchased 8 acres of land including a lot that was previously an old city ball field.

After the purchase, the city approached a movie chain looking at a potential development site near a highway intersection that featured high traffic and retail development including Wal-Mart and Lowes. The land costs in the area were high. The city proposed an alternate site for the downtown movie theatre development that featured plenty of activity and cheaper land. Alliance Entertainment of Indiana completed a study of the downtown site and found that it made good economic sense, even without city incentives. Aane Aaby, Director of Community Development for the City of Massillon said neighboring properties made the development even more attractive. The presence of a city-owned and operated recreation center located across the street from the proposed site was

promising. In addition, Alliance Entertainment was able to purchase both the 8-acre lot from the city and land adjacent to what would be the theatre development. Aaby said that greater control of the land and its future development around the new 12-plex theatre was important to the developers. Scheduled to open later this spring is The Great Escape Movie Theater.

New Angola Theatre: Angola NY, pop 2,266
Non-Profit Ownership and Educational Opportunity

The renovation of the New Angola theatre began when the Claddagh Commission, a local non-profit organization that works with the developmentally disabled, purchased the Angola Theatre in December of 2001. What followed was a speedy renovation completed in May of 2002. In addition to providing the community with a single-screen first run theatre, the facility also provides work opportunities for the Claddagh Commission's clients. Last year, 38,000 people attended films in the 393-seat New Angola Theatre. Jack Chiappone, director of support for the Claddagh Commission, noted that an individual could have just as easily purchased, renovated and run a similarly situated theatre. However, the investment, which he expects the Commission will earn back in 7-10 years, has the positive impact of supporting a local work program.

Pix Theatre: Lapeer, MI, pop 9,072
Mixed-Use Venue

The Pix Theatre serves as a focal point for local arts and community activities within the traditional main street of Lapeer, Michigan. An eight screen Cineplex within the town limits dominates the movie market. As a result, the 296 seat PIX is primarily a live performing arts theatre that shows second run films on weekends when no performances are scheduled. In 1996, the city purchased the PIX in order to save the historic building and its historic use as a theatre. Several rows of seats were removed to make room for a stage and the non-profit Pix Art Council was created. The Council now runs the theatre with a volunteer steering committee and single staff person to develop theatre programming. The theatre season stretches from September through May and features the Lapeer Community Theatre, Local Artist Series, Premier Series (with more regionally known talent) Kids Club and School Days Series designed to complement Michigan State school curriculum. Sue Griggs, Executive Director of the Pix Art Council, said the future of the Pix continues to focus more on the performing arts.

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