

The Morris Theatre at 70: *Planning for the future*

If you're reading this now, someone has asked you to join the Morris Theatre Cooperative. A coop membership means joining with over two hundred other area residents whose goal is to restore and revitalize the historic Morris Theatre. The coop has been running the theatre for two years now, and in that time we've learned quite a bit about the movie business. We'd like to share some of our discoveries.

First, we are convinced a modern movie theater can be a success in Morris.

Movie theaters in area communities are splitting into two groups. Single-screen theatres, like our Morris Theatre, have seen their revenues shrink leading to a cycle of facility neglect, fewer patrons, and declining revenue. On the other hand, theatres that modernize, upgrade their equipment, and offer multiple-screens thrive. As an example, the Cozy Theater in Wadena, a community slightly smaller than Morris, offers a lively demonstration of what is possible: three screens, spotlessly clean auditoriums, 3-D projection, and lines of patrons buying tickets. The Main Street Theatre in Sauk Center is another example of multi-screen success with six auditoriums and the latest equipment. The owners of both

of these businesses invested to upgrade and maintain their theaters and were rewarded with revenues that more than paid for the upgrades. We believe this is possible in Morris as well.

The Cozy Theatre
in Wadena
averaged 1161
tickets sold per
week during a
nine-week period
this summer.
Wadena's
population is
4130.

Movie distribution companies demand multi-week runs when movies open on "the break." Three screens means a new movie nearly every week.

Second, we believe a movie theater is a vital asset in a small town like Morris.

The simple truth is that a community that offers options for relaxation and entertainment is a more attractive place to live. We all know how a theater can be a part of our lives: dinner and a movie, a Saturday matinee for the kids, opening night at the latest blockbuster film and maybe a bite to eat at a local restaurant afterward. The flashing neon lights on the big Morris Theatre sign say, "Something's happening tonight!" Sure, we can watch the films on DVD at home,

but there is something about seeing movies on the big screen with our friends and neighbors in the audience. It's just better. A busy movie theater promotes downtown business, keeps local dollars local, and provides a place to relax and enjoy a show.

Third, coop members benefit in special ways. Of course, the first benefit of being a member of the coop is that you know you've helped keep the movies in Morris, but there is more. Coop members receive discounts on concessions and complimentary tickets with every ten paid admissions. Additionally, when the theater becomes profitable, members will be eligible to share in future profits.

Much has already been accomplished. For starters, with the financial support of our members we've raised over \$150,000. With that money we own our theater outright and have made significant investments in the business. We've upgraded speakers and added digital sound to improve the movie experience. We've repaired plumbing, renewed paint, and cleaned out the nooks and crannies. Outside, you may have noticed our bright, renewed sign, restored to authentic art deco colors. And soon, the stucco exterior will be repaired and given a whole new topcoat and fresh paint. The Morris Theatre is coming back.

Planning for the next phase is nearly complete. Moving forward requires a plan to upgrade the theater further and a plan to expand our business. With the help of Engin and Associates, architects from Willmar, we have developed a remodeling design that meets the needs of our future business. The plan retains the historical features of the art deco building, but also uses the large interior space for three theaters, generous concession areas, and modern restrooms. With stadium seating and top quality amenities, there won't be a finer movie experience west of the Twin Cities.

With the help of Cooperative Development Services (CDS), consultants from the Twin Cities, we've also developed a business plan that realistically assesses the potential of the area market. We've visited regional theaters and checked the numbers to see that our plan's assumptions match actual performances in similar markets.

We've recruited an enthusiastic member base, many of whom volunteer to help run the business. Some sell popcorn, some run the projector, some organize volunteer paint crews, and some serve on committees. Our members have found more ways to help than we can list here, but there are plenty of opportunities left.

How can you help? That's easy. We want to double our members and double our member units during this membership drive. If you haven't become a member yet, now is the perfect time. If you already are a member, then consider buying another membership unit. Best of all, please consider explaining why you believe the Morris Theater is an important part of our community life to someone you know and who isn't a member yet. The more involved and informed members we have, the faster we can move on to the next step in the plan.

For more information on how to become a member, contact Dave Aronson, Treasurer, at (320)589-3191 or email joinus@morristheatre.net.

Ask to see:

- Our 3-D architectural rendering
- Our model of the new theater
- Our business plan
- Our financial projections

Please join the Morris Theatre Cooperative today!