

Grant Funds for Community Cultural Planning and Action Plans
Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation
Funded through a Special Initiatives Grant from Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism

Project Name: Urban/Town/Village Center Visioning and Revitalization
Community Cultural Planning and Action Plans

APPLICATION for GRANT FUNDS
Exhibit A

Palace Theater
Danbury, Connecticut



The Palace Theater, 1929

Date: June 3, 2009, revised July 27, 2009
Municipality Applying: City of Danbury, 155 Deer Hill Avenue,
Danbury, Connecticut 06810
Principal Contact: Dennis I. Elpern, Planning Director
Phone number: (203) 797-4525 e-mail: d.elpern@ci.danbury.ct.us

1. Please provide a specific description in one page of the proposed action/revitalization plan that you are contemplating. What are the goals and objectives of the project? What is the historic character of the chosen area? Does the area's resources have an historic designation? Why was the particular area and historic assets chosen?

The City of Danbury is pleased to submit an application for grant funds for a planning study for the restoration of the historic Palace Theater at 165 Main Street in downtown Danbury. The privately-owned Theater, built in 1926, is located within the Main Street Historic District and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Theater initially hosted live vaudevillian acts and later featured such famous performers as Louis Armstrong and Bob Hope. More recently, it was used exclusively for motion pictures until its closing in 1995, although a small portion of it has recently been reopened for special events.

Once, the Palace Theater was a major destination for the people of Danbury, the place to go for daytime and evening entertainment, generating pedestrian activity and benefitting nearby restaurants and stores. It is our hope to restore the Theater to its former prominence where it can act as a catalyst for historic preservation and downtown revitalization and once again provide a regional destination for the arts and entertainment.

The Main Street Historic District, which includes the Palace Theater, includes 132 properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The restoration of the Theater will provide benefits to both the community and property owner alike, for maintaining a diversity of historic architectural styles not only adds to the visual appeal of the City but can also stimulate private investment in neighboring properties, turning marginal areas into viable, economically sound districts. The excitement generated by a fully operational Theater will also help retail stores, restaurants and other businesses by attracting patrons and offering unique experiences not found elsewhere. As Christopher Wigren, Deputy Director of the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation, succinctly put it, "Any kind of attraction benefits every other thing."

The exterior style of the Theater is modern with colonial revival influences. Inside, the original chandeliers and other period fixtures are suspended in the grand lobby spaces surrounded by Corinthian columns and classic revival cornices. A six foot high statue sculpted in Rome in 1867 of Carrara marble stands as the centerpiece. The Theater has a total capacity of over 1,800 seats and the stage is 34 by 67 feet in size.

Necessary improvements to be assessed include, among others: general interior renovations and repairs, including ceilings, walls and floors, bathrooms, dressing rooms, stage rigging and the orchestra pit; electrical, mechanical, plumbing, and HVAC upgrading; handicap access, sprinkler systems and environmental upgrades; and façade, marquee and entrance restoration. Less than one quarter of all seats are suitable for current use and need to be replaced.

Restoration of the Palace Theater has been a long-standing goal of the City. The Danbury *Plan of Conservation and Development*, adopted in 2002, included a major recommendation to "...restore the Palace Theater as a center for the performing arts." That would strengthen previous City efforts to revitalize the downtown, efforts which have included downtown redevelopment, streetscape and park improvements, enhanced parking, and business recruitment efforts. In addition, the City provides tax exemptions for the restoration of historic properties and has restored the Old Jail for use as part of the Senior Center, the old Library as the headquarters of the Danbury Music Centre, and Union Station as a railroad museum. The Architectural Advisory Committee reviews and makes recommendations on new construction, alterations and signs, and zoning regulations are in place to ensure that building heights are compatible with existing buildings in the Main Street Historic District.

Last year, the Mayor appointed the *Main Street Renaissance Task Force* to prepare a plan to revitalize the downtown, a plan which will include ways and means of promoting business development, housing, community activities, contextual urban design and historic preservation. It will also consider new regulations regarding view angles, build-to lines, first floor commercial, design review, demolition delay, and the creation of an historic district commission.

The *Task Force* has repeatedly urged the restoration of the Palace Theater as a key component in achieving its approved Vision Statement for the downtown:

The downtown will be the primary focus of City life, with a diversity of activities and thriving businesses, high quality housing, exceptional urban design, preservation of historic buildings, varied entertainment, and a vibrant street life.

The *Task Force* has recognized a number of planning principles essential for downtown revitalization, including, among others, the following which are especially pertinent to the Theater.

- A diversity of activities which bring people downtown, including business, entertainment, community facilities and public events, should be encouraged. Downtown should be “the place to be,” with different people doing different things at different times.
- Plans should target areas capable of more intense development, encouraging catalysts which will stimulate the creation of centers that attract people and activity and the interchange among them. It should build upon the inherent strengths of the downtown and the opportunities they present for the future.

The role of the Palace Theater in helping the City achieve its vision for the downtown cannot be overstated and is recognized by others who have worked diligently to promote historic preservation, business development, and the arts and entertainment, as attested to by the attached letters from the Danbury Museum & Historical Society, the Danbury Music Centre, CityCenter Danbury, the Greater Danbury Chamber of Commerce, and a recent editorial of the Danbury News-Times.

Although the revitalization of the downtown will require the efforts of many individuals, businesses and non-profit organizations, we believe that restoration of the Palace Theater is a vital first step in that process by contributing to the downtown mosaic and by providing inspiration to all.

But, the restoration effort must begin with a planning study that targets four major areas of research and analysis, as outlined below.

- *Site Analysis.* A description of downtown Danbury, the Main Street Historic District, and the Theater site, including the availability of parking, restaurants and other support facilities, with an emphasis on the role the Theater can play as a catalyst for downtown revitalization.
- *Needs Assessment.* An analysis of restoration needs for the interior and exterior of the Theater, including cost estimates and potential funding sources.
- *Potential Uses and Management.* A preliminary market analysis of the demand for potential users of the Theater, requisites for financial viability, and management considerations.
- *Impact on the City and Region.* An analysis of the contributions a fully operational Theater could make toward promoting the downtown as the cultural, educational and entertainment destination of the City and surrounding region. This includes an analysis of existing and potential programs that would benefit from an outstanding venue and the synergy which could occur among them. Existing programs include, among others, events and performances sponsored by CityCenter Danbury, the Danbury Music Centre, the Housatonic Valley Cultural Alliance, and the Connecticut Film Festival.

Our proposal fully meets the criteria of the grant program sponsored through the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation by (1) restoring a historic and cultural asset in the Main Street Historic District, (2) working with non-profit organizations and stakeholders to reflect community interests and promote artistic needs, (3) providing a venue for regional programming for the Housatonic Valley, and (4) discouraging sprawl by revitalizing our downtown and providing access to the arts and entertainment close to home.

2. Briefly outline in one page how the proposed planning will be accomplished and which professional consultants you intend to use. Who are the stakeholders? Provide photographs of proposed area and attach to application. Discuss timelines for completion, deliverables and action steps you hope to facilitate as a result of the CT Trust project funding.

The City will seek a multi-disciplinary team, including an architectural firm experienced in historic architecture and theater restoration and other consultants with experience in environmental assessment, market analysis and theater management. Procedures established by the City for soliciting qualified firms include a Request for Qualifications, evaluation, and selection of the best qualified team for the planning study.

Stakeholders in the renovation of the Palace Theater include, among others, the following groups and individuals who will benefit directly or indirectly from restoration.

- The City of Danbury, long an investor in downtown revitalization and parent organization of the Danbury Redevelopment Agency and the Main Street Renaissance Task Force.
- Joseph DaSilva, Jr., owner of the Palace Theater and adjacent parking and a building which could be available for a restaurant associated with the Theater upon restoration and reopening.
- The Danbury Museum & Historical Society, offering historical displays and archival material on Danbury, and which owns and manages the Marian Anderson Studio and the Charles Ives Mansion, both once owned by former Danbury residents.
- CityCenter Danbury, a special services tax district composed of downtown property owners and sponsor of the Summer Concert Series on the Danbury Green, the annual Taste of Greater Danbury, and many other downtown events.
- The Danbury Music Centre, the parent organization of the Danbury Symphony Orchestra, Danbury Concert Chorus, Danbury Community Orchestra, and more.
- The Connecticut Film Festival, sponsor of the annual week-long film festival featuring independent movies and musical performances.
- The Housatonic Valley Cultural Alliance, a ten-town regional organization dedicated to linking the Housatonic Valley both culturally and artistically to promote economic development. Sponsor of a three-day "Accessible Art" program of music performances and art.
- The Ridgefield Symphony Orchestra and other local musicians and community theater groups.
- The Danbury Library, sponsor of a number of events in the arts and entertainment for children.
- The Greater Danbury Chamber of Commerce, providing services and programs for the local business community.
- Western Connecticut State University and its 6,000 member student body.
- Downtown merchants, various civic, ethnic and fraternal organizations, and residents.

According to the grant application announcement, the planning study must be completed within nine months of municipal selection (September 2009 through May 2010). We suggest the following preliminary milestones.

- Notice of selection.
- Development of the Formal Work Plan: weeks 1-3.
- Advertisement and receipt of Requests for Qualifications: weeks 4-6.
- Interviews and selection: weeks 7-9.
- Contract signing: week 10.
- Draft Planning Study preparation: weeks 11-35.
- Review and comment by team members: week 36.
- Revisions and presentation of final Planning Study: weeks 37-39.

Deliverables from the consultant will include multiple copies of the final Planning Study, including graphics, and a power point presentation for public meetings. The Study will be used as the basis for the subsequent preparation of architectural and engineering plans, project construction and renovations, and future programming by a professional management firm.

3. Amount of funding you are requesting? Will there be other funding sources in the project? Please identify.

The City is requesting \$ 45,000 in grant funding. Additional funding will be contributed by the owner, Joseph DaSilva, Jr., toward the cost of the study as needed, with an initial commitment of \$ 10,000. See the attached letter confirming his contribution.

Due to extreme financial constraints, the City is unable to provide a financial contribution at this time, but will provide in-kind services for the administration of the study.

Photographs: The Palace Theater



The Palace Theater today



Theater entrance



Lobby



Lobby Statue



Lobby ceiling



First floor seating



Mezzanine



Wall detail



Chandelier

Photographs: Downtown Danbury



Historic Main Street Danbury



Palace Walk adjacent to the Theater



The Summer Concert Series on the Danbury Green

Attachments

- **Joseph DaSilva, Jr., July 22, 2009** p. 9
- **Danbury Museum & Historical Society, July 14, 2009** p. 10
- **Danbury Music Centre, Inc., July 14, 2009** p. 11
- **CityCenter Danbury, July 15, 2009** p. 12
- **Greater Danbury Chamber of Commerce, Inc., July 22, 2009** p. 13
- **The News-Times, “Restoring the Palace Theater,” July 17, 2009** p. 14

JOSEPH DASILVA, JR.
288 MAIN STREET
DANBURY, CONNECTICUT 06810
203-748-9112

July 22, 2009

Mr. Dennis Elpern
City of Danbury
155 Deer Hill Avenue
Danbury, CT 06810

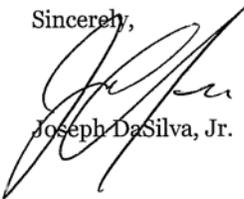
RE: Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation

Dear Mr. Elpern,

With this letter, I enforce my commitment of \$10,000.00 as part of the monies to be spent along with the \$45,000.00, from the commission, to ensure that the quality of our efforts is reached. With the combined total of, \$55,000.00, I do believe we should be able to receive a comprehensive study of needs and assurances that the theater will provide a destination point not only for the residents of Danbury, but for the surrounding towns, as well.

If I can be of further assistance please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Joseph DaSilva, Jr.



DANBURY
Museum & Historical
SOCIETY

Where the Past is Always Present!

**Danbury Museum
& Historical
Society Authority**

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Mr. Dennis Elpern
Planning Director
City of Danbury
City Hall
155 Deer Hill Avenue
Danbury, CT 06810

July 14, 2009

Dear Dennis,

We were thrilled to learn that the City of Danbury has renewed its efforts to preserve and revitalize our downtown with the application for a grant to survey and produce a needs assessment and impact study of the Palace Theater. The restoration of this gorgeous, historic structure, in the heart of Danbury's Main street district, will no doubt provide visual enrichment to our downtown and a revitalization of our Main street business area. Hopefully, this restoration will inspire other business owners to adaptively reuse their historic structures.

Visually the Palace Theater is an iconic presence in our Main Street corridor. The building projects an air of a bygone era and architecturally presents a solid design that both compliments and enhances the new and historic architecture on our Main Street. A restored Palace Theatre would be a wonderful centerpiece to Danbury's Main Street revitalization program and offer a center for non-profit events and programs to benefit the entire area. With a restored Palace Theatre it is not hard to imagine that our community would feel empowered to take the steps to restore other historic structures in the Nationally Registered Main Street Historic District and that we could see this effort projected outward to other historically significant areas of our city.

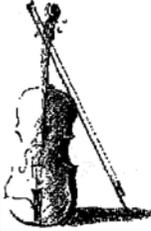
We enthusiastically support the application and would be happy to lend further support on future applications as this project moves forward.

Most sincerely

Brigid Guertin
Executive Director

Levi Newsome
Director of Museum Operations

43 Main Street, Danbury, Connecticut 06810
(203) 743-5200 • Fax (203) 743-1131 • www.danburyhistorical.org



Danbury Music Centre, Inc.

256 Main Street, Danbury, Connecticut 06810
Phone: (203) 748-1716 Fax: (203) 794-1308
email: dmc1935@snet.net <http://www.danbury.org/MusicCtr>

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JUL 15 2009

PLANNING & ZONING
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July 14, 2009

Mr. Dennis I. Elpern
Planning Director
City of Danbury
155 Deer Hill Avenue
Danbury, CT 06810

Dear Mr. Elpern,
Thank you for asking me about the Danbury Music Centre's interest in the restoration of the Palace Theatre on Main Street.

As you know, the Danbury Music Centre is very active in presenting orchestral, choral and ballet performances in Danbury. It would be a tremendous boon to be able to use the Palace Theatre for a performance venue, in particular for the always sold out performances of the *Nutcracker Ballet*.

In your pursuit of a grant from the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation to study the potential restoration of the Palace Theatre, please keep in mind that the Danbury Music Centre would make tremendous use of this location should it become available.

I am also aware of many other local and not so local organizations needing performance space. The only large performance venues in Danbury are in the local public schools and at Western Connecticut State University. It is difficult to schedule performances in any of those auditoriums because of the schools' own thriving arts programs.

I cannot think of a better investment for downtown Danbury than bringing back the Palace Theatre in all its glory and majesty.

Sincerely,

Nancy F. Sudik
Executive Director
Danbury Music Centre

Andrea Gartner
CityCenter Manager

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JUL 16 2009

PLANNING & ZONING
CITY OF DANBURY

July 15, 2009

Mr. Dennis Elpern
Department of Planning and Zoning
City of Danbury
155 Deer Hill Avenue
Danbury, CT 06810

Dear Mr. Elpern,

Danbury has always been a place about community and no place can the community celebrate better than downtown. As the metropolitan area for the Housatonic Valley region, downtown Danbury should deliver what every good city has to offer. And CityCenter Danbury has made a commitment to that end by striving to create downtown Danbury as a destination for culture, arts, dining and entertainment to foster a strong community and strengthen the local and regional economy.

On behalf of CityCenter Danbury, an economic non-profit organization representing and working for the property owners of the Danbury Downtown Special Service, we strongly encourage the CT Trust for Historic Preservation to fund a study of the Palace Theater in downtown Danbury. Per annum, District tax revenues from property owners infuse nearly \$200,000 into downtown and leverage another \$150,000 for our special events programming. Any progress that can be made to restore the Palace Theater to a fully functional facility available to the community is wholeheartedly endorsed by CityCenter Danbury.

We are working hard to solidify the galvanizing energy we've generated with the property owner by presenting events in the current usable space of the Palace Theater. A refurbished Palace Theater would be a compliment to what we have already built: the CT Film Festival, Family Night, non-profit and community fundraisers, the Housatonic Valley Cultural Alliance Accessible Art Event and First Night Danbury.

Any discussion that CityCenter Danbury has with municipal and state leaders, merchants, private developers and the public include the importance of restoring the Palace Theater as the cultural hub of downtown. There is great excitement and support in the community to bring the theater back and there is strong sentiment to continue the expansion of culture, arts, and entertainment in CityCenter.

The Palace Theater is a keystone to future downtown revitalization. In the initial phase of any redevelopment plan, the Palace will play a crucial role. It is a resource to bring the community together, a place for business seminars, presentations, and product launches, a healthy diversion for WCSU and NVCC students, and a venue to help CityCenter Danbury with events and activities providing an amenity to the region - in short, a necessary catalyst to the economic revitalization of our Main Street.

Sincerely,


Mark Nolan, Chairman


Andrea Gartner, Managing Director

186 Main Street • Danbury, CT 06810
Tel: 203-792-1711 • Fax: 203-792-7981
www.citycenterdanbury.com



July 22, 2009

Dennis Elpern
Planning Director
City of Danbury
155 Dear Hill Avenue
Danbury, CT 06810

Dear Dennis:

On behalf of the Greater Danbury Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, our 1000 plus members and the regional business community, I am writing in strong support of the City's application for a grant from the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation to hire a consultant to prepare a planning study for the restoration of the Palace Theater. For years the City of Danbury and the private sector have committed significant resources to the revitalization of downtown Danbury. Major infrastructure and quality of life assets have been allocated to this important hub of the greater Danbury area in order to facilitate the master plan of developing a dining and entertainment district.

One of the missing pieces however has always been a restored arts venue like the Palace Theater. We have no doubt that a reinvigorated performing arts and entertainment facility would further stimulate private investment in the downtown and help with the promotion of the district as a regional destination. Additional stores, restaurants and other cultural endeavors would most definitely follow if this city landmark was rejuvenated.

The Palace Theater is an extremely important economic driver for the revitalization, growth and quality of life in the Greater Danbury area. For these and many other reasons we urge the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation to look favorably on this grant application.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stephen A. Bull". The signature is written over the word "Sincerely," and extends to the right.

Stephen A. Bull
President & CEO
Greater Danbury Chamber of Commerce

Greater Danbury Chamber of Commerce, Inc.
39 West Street • Danbury, Connecticut 06810 • 203-743-5565
Fax: 203-794-1439 email: info@danburychamber.com
Web: www.danburychamber.com

The News-Times

A Hearst newspaper

Published daily since 1883

David R. Dear Jr.
Publisher

Art Cummings
Editor

Brian Koonz
Opinion Editor

Jacqueline Smith
Managing Editor

FRIDAY, JULY 17, 2009

Restoring the Palace Theater

Support needs to be shown
at every level in the community

Cultivation and support of the arts enriches life in a community. Danbury has traditionally supported the arts, and it now has the opportunity to help a venerable old theater make a comeback.

The Palace Theater, built in 1928 in the days of vaudeville, had been the host of live performances from touring Broadway shows to musical acts. Many in the area can fondly recall the glittering times.

The theater closed in 1995, as so many other downtown theaters across the country had done. But the region is fortunate that developer Joseph DaSilva Jr. bought the theater and last year began opening its doors to events.

Though it is privately owned, the Palace cannot be a one-man show. The community needs to provide support.

We applaud Danbury's leaders for understanding this and for proactively seeking a \$45,000 grant from the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation to study restoration of the theater.

We call upon the trust to seriously consider Danbury's request. A thriving Palace would embody the duality of preserving a gem of the past while nurturing the downtown's cultural future.

City officials also are discussing a public-private partnership, and it is worth exploring how the city can be a conduit for restoration grants and local support.

DaSilva has invested about half-a-million dollars already to get the 81-year-old theater to the point where doors could open to the public once again.

Twice now the Palace has been the centerpiece for the Connecticut Film Festival, and it has been the source of city pride and excitement.

Standing in the Palace lobby with sweeping staircases on either side and an elaborate marble sculpture in the middle, one has the palpable sense that the theater is part of Danbury's rich history.

The Palace cannot succeed with grants and political backing alone. Residents of the city and surrounding area need to show support.

They need to attend events at the theater. And, to go a step further, it would be wonderful for those who understand the value of a cultural gem in the heart of the city on Main Street to form a grassroots network.

How about a Friends of the Palace Theater?

If the local community at every level gets involved, the Palace Theater is sure to flourish, and the region will be the better for it.