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Uptown Theater being renovated

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GRAND PRAIRIE — A dozen years after it closed, Grand Prairie's 57-year-old **Uptown Theater** is poised to rise again. It opened March 17, 1950, as a first-run movie house. With the development of shopping malls and multi-screen **theaters**, the old **theater** at 120 E. Main St. eventually transitioned into a second-run dollar movie house.

The third time around, it's set to reopen as a multi-use performing arts center and, it is hoped, as a catalyst for redevelopment of downtown Grand Prairie.

Workers now are scrambling to finish renovation of the building's exterior, complete with new flashing neon lights, in time for "Lights, Camera, **UPTOWN**: A Marquee Celebration" — a lighting ceremony and street party set for Sept. 15.

The actual grand opening of the renovated **theater** is at least a year off; officials hope to start booking performances for late 2008.

The city paid \$400,000 for the 10,000-square-foot building in 2005 and is spending another \$3.5 million to restore it and adjacent office buildings it has leased, said Elspeth McDonald, the **theater's** managing director. About half of the money was raised through municipal bonds and the other half through sales taxes.

Marshall Warder, the city's building projects manager, said Grand Prairie leaders wanted to save an old building, provide a venue for performance groups and spark downtown redevelopment.

Anything that lures more people downtown can only help, said RaDonna Hessel, president of the Grand Prairie Chamber of Commerce.

"I think when you put in something at this level that people will be looking at the opportunities around it," Hessel said.

McDonald said the **theater** will be a true multi-use facility, available for a range of activities — plays, concerts, dance troupes, meetings, regional and national touring productions — even the occasional movie.

Built strictly for films, the original building had virtually no backstage. A new stage and orchestra pit is planned. The city also has taken 20-year leases on three retail shops attached to the building. They are being converted to offices and rehearsal spaces.

The original **Uptown** had 1,100 seats; the plan now is for 400, a much more manageable space, said Libby Clawson, executive director of the Grand Prairie Arts Council.

The **theater** will be home base for the arts council, which in its 28-year history has had to scramble to find spaces for its art shows, plays and concerts.

"We've been all over the city. Anywhere and everywhere," Clawson said. That's included school auditoriums, City Hall, churches and empty office buildings.

"This means we can actually plan a whole season and be able to complete the schedule.

We always have to put 'Location to be determined,'" she said. "We have a nice following from across the area, but people never know where we are going to be."

She said her group is working on planning their performances through 2010 to give McDonald the opportunity to start booking other groups around them.

Uptown Theater

The city of Grand Prairie is renovating the 1950 **Uptown Theater** at 120 E. Main St. A marquee lighting event is scheduled next month, though the **theater** won't reopen until late 2008. The city is investing about \$3.9 million to restore the **theater** and adjacent office buildings it has leased.

"Lights, Camera, **UPTOWN**: A Marquee Celebration"

7-10 p.m. Sept. 15

Free music, dance, entertainment and marquee lighting ceremony

Online: www.artsgp.com; www.grandprairiechamber.org

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