

COMMENTARY

New 4th Avenue destroys Anchorage history with demolition downtown

Sam Combs

The 4th Avenue Theatre was acquired by Peach Investments at the 2009 foreclosure sale when Northrim Bank closed the bidding with no bids; those of us attending breathed a sigh of relief. Then, Joe Fang asked the bank if bidding could be reopened. The bank reopened bidding, which we believed was unethical. The Fangs bid low, around \$790,000, and bidding was closed.

Peach claimed that they "... invested heavily to maintain and repair the aging structure." I requested from the Acting Building Official of the Anchorage Building Department that any building permit applications for claimed work be emailed to me. Based on what I received, there have been two instances in the past 13 years when that's occurred. Under Demolition Permit C16-2170, there was a boiler inspection by the Municipality on May 26, 2017. According to the Municipality, "There is no record of a permit to replace the boiler." Under the same permit, a status inspection was performed on Nov. 17, 2017. The Municipality stated, "There are no inspection comments under the other two demo permits C18-2375 and C22-1003."

In an ADN article on Dec. 2, 2017, "Joe Fang, whose family owns Peach Investments, said at a December work session with the Assembly that he wanted to 'assure everybody ... we have no intention of demolishing the theater.'" He said the company needed the permit to replace a boiler, which he said would require demolishing some parts of the building's interior." The reason for the permit was to remove the boiler, which was apparently never done. The previous owner of the theater, Robert Gottstein, has confirmed that he replaced the main boiler prior to the Certificate of Occupancy in 1992 and the tandem boiler later. Since there were apparently no other permits applied for by Peach and the maximum amount one can complete maintenance on a commercial building is \$5,000 without a permit, it's questionable if the claimed heavy investment and/or "... water intrusion repairs, mechanical upgrades and a new roof membrane ..." occurred. If they did, they appear to have been completed without a permit.

Referring to the Nov. 14, 2006 Condition Inspection Report, Peach claimed that "... initial cost estimates to restore the building were too expensive for any interested parties to bear." The actual cost estimate from a "Rehabilitation Cost Analysis"



dated Nov. 13, 2006, by the municipality, stated the total budget to completely restore the theater would be \$6 million, with a possible \$2 million contingency for a total of \$8 million. That is a very reasonable amount and not "too expensive."

The claim that the basement encroaches into 4th Avenue is true, only under the sidewalk, but the theater has "grandfather rights" — it's been there 75 years — and Historical Building waivers should allow this to remain.

Peach's claim that they "... explored numerous "adapt-and-reuse" methods ..." seems to fly in the face of reality, and their claim that "Peach engaged and worked with an esteemed historic preservation consultant (with presences throughout the U.S.) ..." makes one wonder. I was the leader of the Historic Preservation Team for the "Professional Capital Improvement Plan for the 4th Avenue Theatre" in 2006 for the Anchorage Downtown Partnership and the municipality. Why did Peach ignore the fact that we had decades of experience on our local team? I presented Joe Fang with a letter at the auction by Northrim Bank offering our Historic Preservation Team's expertise in the restoration of the theater. We never heard from anyone at Peach.

Our team had a plan to preserve/restore the theater as a multi-cultural, multi-arts facility with the vacation of the alleyway behind the theater to allow backstage circulation and a green room for a playhouse theater and/or movie theater,

the basement a black-box theater, Sydney Laurence Room on the second level as a dance studio, offices for the many theatrical and arts companies in Anchorage, and the connection of the PAC/Egan Convention Center to the Key Bank to the theater with a sky bridge. The 4th Avenue Theatre would be a place for visitors and Alaskans during all seasons. As I stated on the HGTV show "Restore America with Bob Vila" on the Oscar Anderson House restoration in 2000, people don't come to a place to see shiny new buildings, they come to see the history of the place they are visiting.

The claim that "Peach remains committed to a vigorous effort to salvage and preserve portions of the distinctive interior features in the lobby, mezzanine and murals" must be proven. As far as I know, the two large murals have not been removed to date. It is questionable if they can be removed without destroying them, because Robert Gottstein said they are "three-dimensional plaster with gold leaf that is mounted on chicken wire (lath?)". Gottstein said he would be willing to donate the first \$1,000 of what he imagines would be no more than \$10,000 to remove them as long as they were for public use.

The claims of hazardous material mitigation is questionable. Gottstein has stated that he had removed all hazardous material, i.e., asbestos, except for some duct areas that are not accessible to the public. The municipality granted a Certificate of Occupancy back in May 1992 and would

not have granted that unless the building was safe to occupy. Any remaining asbestos is limited and could be easily either abated or encapsulated. Any code issues can either be solved or waived, since this is a historic building that is on the National Register of Historic Places and the IEBC directly addresses these issues. The Condition Inspection Report of 2006 did not address lead-based paint, but any found can be mitigated by containment and is not required to be removed since this building is commercial and no one occupies the theatre. The handwringing by Peach and the mayor as to hazardous materials is not justified as a reason to demolish the building and doesn't ring true.

Peach claims to have fully documented the building to Historical American Building Survey standards and "To date, most of this information has been collected." I and many others would like to see proof of said documentation. I possess a copy of the "4th Avenue Theatre Historic Building Report" written by a local firm in the late 1980s that has a wealth of information on the theater. Peach claimed for 13 years that they would not demolish the building and now they are doing so. This demolition will destroy Anchorage's historical center and no amount of fake facade and/or fake sign will make up for this destruction. To place a fake as a historical facade and sign is an insult to the people of Anchorage and Alaska and a slap in our faces of what once was. I've always believed in honesty in my restoration of structures, and this is dishonest. I along with many others would prefer it not be placed in the maw of what appears to be an alien bug about to consume the 4th.

Peach has allowed the theater to decline over the past 13 years. Their lack of responses to viable offers from Alaskans to purchase the theater to restore it, the inability for anyone to view the interior of the theater and their now-broken promise to not demolish the theater have caused the lack of trust from our community.

Contact the Anchorage Assembly today to encourage them to stop the demolition until there is an actual building permit in place for the new building. Otherwise, who knows how long there'll be just a void where the beautiful, historic 4th Avenue Theatre once stood, and we will have lost our historical center.

Samuel Duff Combs, AIA, NCARB, is a Historic Preservation Architect. He lives in Anchorage.

COMMENTARY

Costly West Susitna Access Project will benefit foreign mining companies, not Alaskans

Todd Rust and Kevin Dana

We support responsible development of Alaska's roads and resources, but the West Susitna Access Road is a waste of money that will hurt Alaska businesses. The recent commentary by a group calling themselves Friends of West Susitna made claims about the road that sound compelling enough to the average person who's not closely tracking the backdoor deals of the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority, or AIDEA. The problem is, they aren't who they say they are. And they're wrong.

The commentary touted public access to the road, but to date AIDEA and the out-of-state corporate interest groups backing it have refused to provide a clear answer of what that access will look like, or even confirm whether it will exist. To be clear, this road is being designed as a private road, only being built to provide access from Port Mackenzie to the Yentna Mining District. The only folks guaranteed to have access are the foreign mining interests that are attempting to quietly push through an expensive and unnecessary project, hoping we won't notice what's happening. But we do, and we're calling on all Alaskans to pay attention.

The Friends of West Susitna group wants you to believe they're just everyday folks like you and me, but they're doing a sloppy job of hiding their ties to the largest trade association in Alaska. Links on their website will take you back to The Alaska Support Industry Alliance, perhaps because millions of dollars are on the line to be made from government insiders on this ill-advised project.

The cost of construction alone is cause for concern. Conservative estimates are that this road will cost Alaskans more than \$350 million in funds we don't have to spend, at a time when the politicians in Juneau can barely balance a budget. How many of us have driven on roads that are desperate for repair? Our neighbors across the Mat-Su agree that we need to be able to take care of the infrastructure we have before we spend millions of dollars of Alaskans' money building roads that we can't even use. With duds like the Alaska Seafood International plant

and the Four Dam Pool that sunk hundreds of millions of dollars into failing projects, we should know better than to trust AIDEA with our investments.

We've raised our families to appreciate and explore Alaska's beauty, and our livelihoods are vested in the ability to hunt, fish and fly with freedom. Building this road would decimate herd animal habitats and drive away the reason to visit in the first place. If you want to visit the wilderness of West Susitna you can hop on a bush plane, riverboat or snowmachine — we already have public access. A private road for a foreign mine simply does nothing to benefit Alaskans.

Despite overwhelming and vocal opposition to the project, AIDEA is attempting to fast-track it with half-baked plans and shoddy permitting information. Recently the state submitted a wetlands permit application for a federal-level environmental impact study required to move this project forward. Last week, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, or USACE, notified AIDEA that its application was incomplete, just two weeks after receiving it. If the molasses-moving bureaucracy of the federal government can turn around a decision that quickly, we can see the writing on the wall: The application was incomplete and incorrect, a rush job.

As conservative small-business owners who are also hunters, fishermen and recreators in the Susitna Valley, we are not opposed to development. Our businesses depend on Alaska being the premier destination for those who want to experience the quiet wilderness of our great state. But we expect it to be done responsibly, thoughtfully and with adequate support from the public. This project has none of those.

Keep your eyes open, Alaska. We invite all Alaskans to write to AIDEA with their concerns on the project and make their voices heard.

Todd Rust is owner and director of operations for Rust's Flying Service and K2 Aviation, a family-owned business in Anchorage, and has lived in Alaska with his family since 1959. Kevin Dana is a lifelong Alaskan and owner of Barney's Sports Chalet. He lives in Chugiak with his wife, three kids and their dog.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ERASING THE PAST

During a visit to the historical city of Charleston, South Carolina several years ago, a local small-restaurant owner said something to me that reminds me of what is happening in our little town.

Charleston is built around the plantations and is the home of the oldest natural history museum in the United States. She told me that a big hotel chain was trying to talk the city leaders into letting them tear down a historical building so they could put up a huge high-rise hotel to house the tourists that were coming to see the historical sites in Charleston.

Once you tear down your history, you don't have much left. I see all the new hotels being built along C Street, as well as all the empty buildings that are begging for leases. This feels like an unnecessary project.

I support knowing the past. The 4th Avenue Theatre building survived the 1964 earthquake and many Alaskans, myself included, spent many nice evenings watching movies with our high school sweethearts. It is unconscionable to let a developer try to erase our past.

—Cindy J. Anderson
Former popcorn pusher at the 4th Avenue Theatre Anchorage

MURKOWSKI SHOULD SUPPORT INFLATION REDUCTION ACT

I recently wrote to Sen. Lisa Murkowski about climate solutions, and she sent back a letter that ended by saying, "Climate change is, and will remain, a priority for me." So I'm asking Sen. Murkowski to work for passage of the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022.

Her letter to me also said, "Looking back at the past year alone, I believe we have made more progress on domestic climate policy than at any other point. The benefits of that work are just beginning and will be felt for years and generations to come. I am seeking to build on our recent successes through new legislation that will continue to advance the science of climate change, reduce the costs of new technologies, and provide greater assistance for adaptation."

Based on those statements, the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 aligns closely with her views.

The bill uses two main levers: major new incentives for private industry to produce far more renewable energy, and other incentives for households to transform their energy use and consumption. These levers are entirely consistent with Sen. Murkowski's stated goals, and they would certainly benefit Alaskans. A new Methane Emissions Reduction Program in the act would reward oil and gas companies that slash their emissions of methane and penalize those that don't. That's an idea Alaskans can embrace: Alaska's laws and regulations on oil field methane emissions and gas flaring are some of the strictest in the world. Because the bill mandates new oil and gas leasing off the coast of Alaska, it has the potential to create new jobs in the state and help us hang on to current ones.

According to independent budget estimates, the act would also raise roughly \$470 billion through new tax provisions, the biggest of which will fall on the country's large corporations. This approach to raising revenue and reducing the budget deficit is supported by all the Alaska voters that I know. The new bill leaves intact most

of the corporate and individual income tax cuts President Donald Trump signed into law.

On health care, this deal allows Medicare to negotiate the price of prescription drugs and makes health care more affordable for millions of Americans. There's no question that those measures are widely — maybe even wildly — popular among Republicans, Democrats, and the many independent Alaska voters who have supported Sen. Murkowski through the years.

Overall, I can't see a single piece of this proposed legislation that should fail to win her support. Please write or call the senator's office to let her know you agree.

—Tim Hinterberger
Anchorage

MISLEADING POLITICAL ADS

I just received a flyer mailed out by the Alaska Republican party that essentially blamed Mary Peltola for "trillion-dollar spending bills," the "worst inflation in decades," and "\$5 a gallon gas."

Mary Peltola has nothing to do with any of those things, as she has never been in a position to affect any of them. To lay that on her is disingenuous at best and actually disgusting. Those things are not the fault of Joe Biden either, as the flyer implies. More likely, the blame lays at Donald Trump's — and his followers' — feet, for ignoring the severity of and downplaying the COVID-19 pandemic, ignoring critical infrastructure needs in the country, and coddling Vladimir Putin, who invaded Ukraine without provocation, causing worldwide inflation and high gas prices.

The Republican Party — national and Alaska — should stop spreading falsehoods and fear-mongering. But that seems to be their M.O. for years. Their mothers must not have told them they should always tell the truth.

—Kevin Hansen
Eagle River

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Many thanks to Christopher Cooke for his recent letter, which said what I've been thinking. Though I prefer not to mock anyone's name, this does seem to be a deliberate misrepresentation, as her last name in big letters on campaign signs might present a different, maybe even uncomfortable, reaction to potential voters than does her first.

Imagine one's joy hearing that "Kelly" won the election turning to confusion when our representative to Congress is someone named "Tshibaka." This assumes, of course, that some voters don't read about candidates before marking their ballot.

—Marilyn Gardner
Wasilla

CHANGE YOUR BATTERIES

This is a friendly reminder to change your smoke detectors' batteries every six months, and to replace your smoke detectors for new ones every 10 years. Remember that smoke detectors should be in every bedroom, and 10 feet away from every bedroom door. Carbon monoxide detectors are also important and should be placed on every floor of your home. The best time to do this is now!

—Amari Vaughan
Anchorage