

Pittsfield Cinema Project Breaks Ground

By Tammy Daniels - September 18, 2008

iBerkshires Staff

PITTSFIELD — It may not have been a cast of thousands, but surely hundreds have been involved in getting the cinema center in downtown off the ground.

An idea that was kicked around in the 1980s entered the planning stage a decade ago and, finally, reached "the end of the beginning" on Thursday as community and business leaders marked the groundbreaking of the Beacon Cinema Project.

"It's funny that we've already done the hard part," said developer Richard Stanley after the ceremony. "The building is going to be the easy part."

The road to transforming the historic Kinnell-Kresge building on North Street into a six-cinema, retail, restaurant and office complex has been long and winding. It's required a complicated partnership of public and private investment and backing from state and local government.

"Some days, the financing package looked more like the 'Perils of Pauline,'" said Stanley.

Indeed, the size of the cast for this \$13 million venture was symbolized by the long line of golden shovels — 15 in all — used for the groundbreaking. "You'll have to use a wide lense," one shoveler joked to the array of media recording the event.

"This venture hasn't been without its ups and downs," said Mayor James M. Ruberto to the crowd behind gathered behind the building on **McKay Street**. "And through those ups and downs, we realized we are the best darn city in the Northeast and we can use this as an example to accomplish anything we collectively set our minds to."

It was, as the mayor is wont to say, "A great day for Pittsfield."



Artist's concept of a restored Kinnell-Kresge building.

The project has long been touted as an important anchor for the downtown, as a way to help revive a moribund North Street in the wake of business and retail closings that hurt the area in 1980s and '90s.

Planners say the movie theater could draw up to 200,000 to the downtown annually; it's expected to create more than 30 jobs and another 60 by boosting business growth.



"A public/private partnership is not for the faint of heart," said Peter J. Lafayette, representing **Downtown Inc.**, the organization that began researching the possibility of a cinema back in 1998 and lassoed Stanley, owner of the Triplex Cinema in Great Barrington, into the project. Since then, the group's played the role of cheerleader, he said.

The proposal began picking up steam over the past few years as the deteriorating Kinnell-Kresge was tapped as a location and the financial puzzle was slowly solved.

Lining up to break ground

Twice the mayor, an early advocate for the cinemas, went to the City Council seeking money from the GE Economic Development Fund, \$2.1 million in all; the banking sector, lead by Legacy Banks and Berkshire Bank, ponied up \$7 million in permanent and bridge financing; the state awarded \$7.5 million in New Markets and federal historic tax credits equity through the Massachusetts Housing Investment Corp.

Another million came from state Office of Travel and Tourism and, the last puzzle piece, was an \$825,000 **Massachusetts Opportunity Relocation and Expansion (MORE) Jobs grant**.

More than once, the project seemed in danger as the precarious financing package was cobbled together.

"I think Deanna must have gone to magician's school," said Stanley, referring to the city's Community Development Director Deanna Ruffer. "She could always pull a rabbit out of a hat."

Joseph Flatley, president of Massachusetts Housing Investment Corp., said that outside of Boston, Pittsfield was one of the biggest recipients of **MHIC investments**, about \$44 million. "You have a great story to tell."

Through all the different administrations and people and agencies attached to the project, said Michael Daly, president of Berkshire Bank, "there's been a desire to create a community we could all be proud of, a community that others were envious of."

"I don't know of another community where the banks pull together like this one," said J. Williar Dunlaevy, president of Legacy Banks, adding the local financial institutions are "rock solid."



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The Kinnell-Kresge building on North Street

State Sen. Benjamin B. Downing, D-Pittsfield, heralded the start of the project as yet another sign that the region was recovering its former glory (while also noting he had graduated high school, college, graduate school and was elected to the Legislature in less time than it took the cinema to get off the ground).

"What we have done in downtown Pittsfield ... is remarkable," he said. "When we graduated from high school we were told there's nothing here for you — pack up your bags and get out. Thanks to your efforts, no generation in Pittsfield or Berkshire County will ever hear that again."

After the speeches given, anyone and everyone who helped the project move forward thanked and the ground broken, Stanley remembered the most important fact — the cinemas will open Dec. 15, 2009, with 3-D movie.

iBerkshires • 106 Main Street • P.O. Box 1787
North Adams, MA 01247 • tel: 413.663.3384 • fax: 413.663.3615 • info@iberkshires.com