



## More theaters, fewer seats planned for Bellevue Theater



*The Bellevue Theater developers appeared before the zoning board to reveal more plans last week. ADAM ANIK/ FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL*

**By JAIMIE JULIA WINTERS**  
[winters@montclairlocal.news](mailto:winters@montclairlocal.news)

The Bellevue Theater developers plan to create six theaters, more than the four housed previously in the facility when it closed in 2017, but with four hundred fewer seats.

The developers envision a family-friendly theater, running first-run movies and offering in-theater dining and beverage service to the occupants of the first class airline sized seats. Because the seats will be so large and there's a need for ADA seating, the number of seats will be reduced by 45 percent. The facility will also offer an indoor/outdoor bar on the first floor and a restaurant on the second floor. More bathrooms will be incorporated, as will an elevator for the first time, according to testimony given at the Jan. 15 zoning board meeting by architect Paul Sionas. The theaters will range in size from 42 to 106 seats.

In June 2019, a group of residents and entrepreneurs announced their intentions to save the historic Tudor theater, which closed in November 2017, with plans to renovate and reopen the nearly century-old Bellevue Avenue landmark.

The new developer, Highgate Hall LLC, consists of seven partners: film and television producer Luke Parker Bowles, actor Patrick Wilson, developer Steven Plofker, corporate strategist Andy Childs, lawyer Larry Slous, marketer Vincent Onorati, and Brandon Jones, former partner of the in-theater dining chain Studio Movie Grill. All but Jones, who currently lives in Texas, are Montclair residents.

The group chose the name "Highgate Hall" from the name of the former second-floor restaurant. The restaurant had a Tudor feel with murals on the walls that regularly changed depending on the season, according to Lianne Renner of the Friends of Anderson Park, who researched the historic movie theater which began showing films in 1922.

The new owners had been seeking relief from zoning law compliance on five issues, including building height, fencing, marquee signage and parking. A previous plan to move the marquee to the eastern corner and wrap around the building has been changed to keep the marquee in the middle of the building, as suggested by the Historic Preservation Commission. Plans still call for the entrance to be moved to the eastern side of the building in order to keep movie-goers and bar patrons separate.

Assistant chair Joseph Fleischer, who ran the meeting for chair William Harrison, who recused himself, had concerns over safety with what he called a "tight" space.

"A lot of things are going on," he said. "I am concerned with how much stuff is being pushed into this." Fleischer added that he felt four-foot-wide corridors were not wide enough and had concern with the stairwells as well.

Parking for the theater has never been offered on-site. Movie-goers will have to depend on finding parking at four parking plazas in Upper Montclair, or along the neighboring streets. When the former owner expanded the theater in 1997 by 100 seats, the parking requirement was 246 spaces. Although the proposed renovations increase the number of theaters, the number of total seats drops from 885 to 489 seats. Township code requires one parking space for every four seats, bringing the parking requirement to 122, just under half of what the requirement had been previously. The bar and restaurant would require another 58 spaces to bring the total requirement to 180 parking spaces.

The developers plan to spruce up the eastern side of the building with murals and the addition of glass awnings to protect movie goers waiting in line to enter. But the developers expect that most customers will book their tickets by using an app. Once inside, food and beverages could be ordered using the app as well.

Plans for expansion include raising the back building height from 38.1 feet to 51.75, where 24 feet is allowed. The reason behind the height increase is to install bigger seats and screens, said Sionas.

Resident Frank Rubacky suggested during the public portion of the meeting that since the back portion of the roof line of the front building will be expanded to add bathrooms, that the developer should go back to the Historic Preservation Commission for approval.

“You are removing a substantial portion of the building and I don’t think they realized that,” said Rubacky.

The property is located in the Upper Montclair Historic Business District, which was established as a local landmark district in 2006. The nomination report identifies the Bellevue Theater as a “key building within the district; a building that possesses distinct architectural and historical significance, and which acts as a landmark within the architectural matrix of the district.”

Rubacky also questioned the allowance of a theater as the area was never zoned for a theater. Although the town has allowed the theater use, and approved its use again for the 1997 expansion, Rubacky suggested there was an abandonment of the use. The zoning board attorney said there was never an intent to abandon it as a theater.

The plan will be heard again March 18 by the Zoning Board of Adjustment.