

# Bellevue Theatre's closing sparks shock, hope for rescue



A Bow Tie employee takes down the signage from the Bellevue Theatre's marquee last Sunday night during the last movie showing at the venue. NEIL GRABOWSKY/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

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[This past Sunday night](#) marked what could be the last picture show at the Bellevue Theatre, leaving residents shocked and heartbroken over Bow Tie Cinemas' decision to close its movie house at the iconic Tudor building in Upper Montclair.

Patrons of the theater, which premiered in 1922 showing a Lillian Gish film, have rallied to try to find ways to keep

the venue open as a cinema. There was a small protest Sunday at the Bellevue; [a “save-the-theater” petition](#) had garnered more than 5,100 names as of Wednesday morning; and a dedicated Facebook page was created to champion rescuing the venue. Some residents suggested that Montclair Film, which has held many festival events at the Bellevue, should come forward as its savior.

Others wondered if township resident and “Late Night” host Stephen Colbert will step up and try to buy the building. It didn’t happen.

But there was a glimmer of hope earlier this week in what seemed to be a bleak situation. Angelo Cifelli, the attorney representing the Bellevue’s owner, [said he had been contacted by several movie-theater operators](#) who expressed interest in the Montclair site. He said his office will be following up on those inquiries in the weeks ahead.

“We’re hopeful,” Cifelli said, reiterating that his client, Jesse Y. Sayegh, was dedicated to having the Bellevue continue operating as a movie theater.

“He’s open to any and all avenues,” the lawyer said.

A small group of people watched Sunday night as Bow Tie employees took down the movie-title signage, letter by letter, from the Bellevue’s marquee, leaving it totally blank. “A Bad Moms Christmas” was the last film to be screened that night, with a 7:45 p.m. showing. A man who said he was the theater’s manager, but declined to give his name, stuck his head out of the box office door and said, “Thanks for your patronage all over the years.”

It is a difficult business environment for downtown movie theaters like the Bellevue, which face stiff competition from not only modern mall multi-plexes – with their reclining lounge-chair seats and expanded snack-bar offerings – but Netflix and DVDs, as well. Bow Tie Cinemas, based in

Ridgefield, Connecticut, has been shuttering other theaters.

In a scenario that mirrors what happened in Montclair, this summer Bow Tie abruptly shuttered a movie house in Madison that had been showing films for 90 years.



Ilmar Vanderer stands in front of the Bellevue Theatre last Sunday, when Bow Tie Cinemas showed its final movie. Vanderer started a Facebook page to spearhead efforts to save the venue as a cinema. NEIL GRABOWSKY/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

Longtime Montclair resident Joe Kavesh, a member of the Township Board of Education and chair of the Montclair Civil Rights Commission, described the Bellevue as his childhood movie theater. He estimated that he has seen more than 150 movies there.

“This is terrible news, a big blow to the Upper Montclair business district, restaurants like De Novo,” Kavesh said. “Hopefully, there is still a place for movie houses, as opposed to the drab cineplexes of Route 3, 17, etc.”

Word that the [Bellevue was closing leaked out last week](#) when the troupe that has been bringing “The Rocky Horror Picture Show” to the venue for 14 years announced that its last-ever performances there would be the coming weekend, because Bow Tie said that it was closing its Bellevue movie operation.

Later there was some discrepancy between the subsequent explanation offered by Bow Tie and the response from Sayegh’s lawyer Cifelli.

[In an email last Thursday](#), Jared Milgram, Bow Tie’s vice president for marketing, food and beverages, said that the company’s lease on the theater had expired and it would close Sunday. But a day later in a phone interview [Cifelli said that Bow Tie had opted not to renew its lease](#) at the Bellevue.

“It just seems a bit disingenuous to tell you the lease expired,” Cifelli said.

[Bow Tie is removing projection equipment and fixtures from the Bellevue](#), “a real blow” to the theater’s future because it would be cost prohibitive for another operator to install new gear, Cifelli said originally. But this week the attorney said that some of the movie operators to whom he had spoken said that it wouldn’t necessarily be a problem for them if Bow Tie took its equipment out of the theater.

The Bellevue Theatre has a storied past, according to Lisanne Renner, historian for Friends of Anderson Park. It “is a key building in the township’s Upper Montclair Historic Business District,” with its Tudor design reinforcing “the English village ambiance of the Upper Montclair shopping district,” Renner said.

The theater was built by Robert Anderson, a son of Charles W. Anderson, who had earlier donated the land for Anderson Park, according to Renner. It opened May 13, 1922, and the first movie shown there was D.W. Griffith’s “Orphans of the Storm,” starring Lillian Gish, she said.

In an email, Jodie Dawson, president of the Upper Montclair Business Association, said, "The theater has been a staple and foundation to our Upper Montclair business community. It has added diversity and arts to the village and has been a draw for people to come from surrounding areas to visit our town. We hope the tradition continues with another theater to continue adding vibrancy to the area."

Dawson is a co-founder of Java Love Coffee Roasting Co., which operates a coffee shop near the theater.

"As for Java Love, we definitely love having the theater a few doors down as it is a draw for people to walk along Bellevue Avenue and stop in for coffee," Dawson said.

Last Sunday, about 15 people met in front of the theater to protest the closing of the movie venue. They are still hopeful that somehow another movie chain will come and keep the Bellevue a movie venue.

"This gathering is not about taking sides between the building owner Jesse Y. Sayegh or Bow Tie Cinemas," Ilmar Vanderer said. "It's the community coming together in support of preserving a iconic, historic landmark and local fixture that helps to maintain Montclair's status as an arts center known for a variety of entertainment offerings."

Vanderer created the "Save Montclair's Historic Bellevue Theatre" Facebook page.

Lena Fine, who started the Change.org petition to save the theater, was among the protesters with Vanderer at the Bellevue that final night.

"I just knew that I was upset," Fine said of her impetus to start the petition, adding that she grew up in Montclair and has been going to the Bellevue for years.

Other customers came to bid farewell to the venue last Sunday.

“I’ve lived in Montclair for 22 years, and in some way I feel connection to establishments, like the Marlboro Inn, closing that have meant a great deal to people,” Marianne Reilly Appel said.

A trio of students from Montclair State University said they were fans of the theater and would take the half-hour walk from campus to see movies there. They arrived to watch the final show at the Bellevue, “A Bad Moms Christmas.”

“We’re seeing the last showing, which we wish was a film that was more iconic like ‘Star Wars,’” said Alex Valdes, one of the students. “Way to go out with a whimper and not a bang.”



A group gathers in front of the Bellevue Theatre, with its bare marquee, last Sunday night. NEIL GRABOWSKY/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

John McMorrow was at the scene taking photos of the Bellevue. He said he has lived in the township more than 20 years, and the beautiful Bellevue building was one of the draws of the

municipality.

“I’m sad to see it go,” he said. “It’s a business decision, and you need to hear both sides of it. ... There are two sides to every story, but unfortunately we come out on the short end.”

Some residents have expressed hope that Montclair Film would be the white knight to rescue the Bellevue, but so far that’s not the case.

“As our supporters know, the theater has been home to the Montclair Film Festival, our special year-round member screenings, and has been a cornerstone of cinema culture in Montclair for decades,” Montclair Film Executive Director Tom Hall said in an email last Sunday.

“First, we want to say thank you to the Bellevue staff for always being such gracious hosts for our organization, and we are hopeful that the owner of the property will be interested in continuing to have a tenant operate the space as a cinema,” he said. “We remain open to conversations around the future of the Bellevue, but do not have any information about the future of the property at the moment.”

Any tenant that leases Bow Tie’s former space at the Bellevue could make changes to the building’s interior, but its exterior is another story, according to Township Planner Janice Talley. The theater is designated as a key building in the Upper Montclair Historic Business District, which means any modifications to its exterior have to be approved by the Historic Preservation Commission, Talley said.

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# It's 'The End' for movies at Montclair's beloved Bellevue Theatre



A group gathers in front of the Bellevue Theatre Sunday night after its marquee had been cleared of its movie titles. It was the last day of operations for Bow Tie Cinemas at the 95-year-old property. NEIL GRABOWSKY/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

By **LINDA MOSS**

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Sunday night marked what was likely the last picture show at the Bellevue Theatre, and long-time patrons and a group of protesters sadly watched as Bow Tie Cinemas employees took down the movie titles from the building's marquee, leaving it strangely blank and bare.

Supporters of the theater are hoping it is not the final

chapter in the history of the 95-year-old movie venue after a sudden and startling turn of events for fans of the Bellevue last week.

Without any warning to Montclair residents or the theater's employees, and after the news leaked out from another source, Bow Tie Cinemas LLC last week confirmed that Sunday would be the last day that the Bellevue would be open as one of its movie houses.

A group of about 15 people gathered in front of the theater around 7:45 p.m Sunday, when the final film "A Bad Moms Christmas" was slated to start, to protest the closing of the movie venue. They are still hopeful that somehow another movie chain will come and keep the Bellevue a movie venue.

"This gathering is not about taking sides between the building owner Jesse Y. Sayegh or Bow Tie Cinemas," said Ilmar Vanderer, who has helped to rally residents to save the movie theater.

"It's the community coming together in support of preserving a iconic, historic landmark and local fixture that helps to maintain Montclair's status as an arts center known for a variety of entertainment offerings," he said. "Fortunately our civic leaders and arts organizations recognize this and hopefully will work out a solution."

That group and other residents watched as Bow Tie Cinemas employees took down the movie-title signage off the building's marquee. A man who said he was the theater's manager, but declined to give his name, stuck his head out of the box office's door and said, "Thanks for your patronage all over the years."

Patrons going into the Tudor-style Bellevue posed for photos in front of the theater, and could be heard lamenting its closing.

News that the Bellevue was [closing leaked out when the troupe](#) that has been bringing “The Rocky Horror Show” to the venue for 14 years announced that its last-ever performances there would be this weekend, because it was told Bow Tie was closing its movie operation.

[A Bow Tie official said](#) that the company was leaving because its lease has expired. In turn, n [an attorney for Sayegh](#), the building’s owner, said that his client had tried to negotiate a new lease with Bow Tie but the movie chain opted not to resign. When efforts to secure a new lease failed Sayegh asked Bow Tie to keep its movie-projector equipment and fixtures at the site, but it refused, according to the attorney, Angelo Cifelli.

Concerned residents, some who say they’ve been going to the theater for years, sprang into action. [Lena Fine, who started a petition on Change.org](#) that as of Sunday night had more than 4,200 names of who want to save the movie theater, was among the protesters at the Bellevue Sunday night.

“I just knew that I was upset,” Fine said of her impetus to start the petition, adding that she grew up in Montclair and has been going to the Bellevue for years.



Montclair resident Lena Fine, 16, started a petition to save the Bellevue Theatre. She stands outside the venue on Sunday night, when it screened its final movie. To the right with a green cap is Evan Cutler, another fan of the Bellevue. NEIL GRABOWSKY/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

Patrons came to bid farewell and see a final movie at the Bellevue.

"I've lived in Montclair for 22 years, and in some way I feel connection to establishments, like the Marlboro Inn, closing that have meant a great deal to people," said Marianne Reilly Appel. "Times change. And if people aren't coming out to the movies I guess it's understandable that they [Bow Tie] can't afford the cost to continue. If enough people were to rally together, who's to say what would happen?"

A trio of students from Montclair State University said they were fans of the theater and would take the half-hour walk from campus to see movies there. They arrived to see the final show at the Bellevue, "A Bad Moms Christmas."

"We're seeing the last showing, which we wish was a film that was more iconic like 'Star Wars,'" said Alex Valdes, one of the students. "Way to go out with a whimper and not a bang."

Several parents said that they lived close enough that their children could grab a slice of pizza, and then walk to the Bellevue, very convenient and safe.

John McMorrow was at the scene taking photos of the Bellevue. He said that he has lived in the township more than 20 years, and the beautiful Bellevue building was one of the draws of the municipality.

"I'm sad to see it go," he said. "It's a business decision, and you need to hear both sides of it ... There are two sides to every story, but unfortunately we come out on the short end."

Evan Cutler, with his family dog, was among those at the Bellevue for the protest.

"Who knows what's going to happen," he said.

Cutler also recalled he and his wife chatting with Rob Reiner outside the Bellevue after a Montclair Film Festival event, and his pride in the town. Cutler added that he had worked with Montclair resident Stephen Colbert on "The Daily Show,"

and knows that the current “Late Night” host was a patron of the Bellevue.

“I’ll see him sneak into a 9:30 film,” Cutler said.

Some residents have expressed hope that Colbert or Montclair Film, which held many screenings and events at the Bellevue, would be the White Knights to swoop in and keep the venue a movie house.

Montclair Film Executive Director Tom Hall sent out an email Sunday about the Bellevue.

“Like so many in our community, we were sad to learn that Montclair’s historic Bellevue Theater would be closing this weekend,” Hall wrote. “As our supporters know, the theater has been home to the Montclair Film Festival, our special year-round member screenings, and has been a cornerstone of cinema culture in Montclair for decades.”

He said, “First, we want to say thank you to the Bellevue staff for always being such gracious hosts for our organization, and we are hopeful that the owner of the property will be interested in continuing to have a tenant operate the space as a cinema. We remain open to conversations around the future of the Bellevue, but do not have any information about the future of the property at the moment.”

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**Beefed-up police, radar, education campaign aim to**

# curtail accidents



Montclair Police Officer Travis Davis, left, talked to residents at a First Ward meeting on Thursday night at the Bellevue Avenue branch of the Montclair Public Library. First Ward Councilman William Hurlock hosted the meeting. LINDA MOSS/STAFF

**By LINDA MOSS**

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The township is taking steps to improve pedestrian safety, including hiring more police officers, employing radar and even mounting a public-information campaign to educate drivers and those crossing local streets.

That was the message at Thursday night's First Ward meeting, hosted by Councilman Bill Hurlock and attended by more than 40

people at the Bellevue Avenue Branch of the Montclair Public Library.

At the meeting Montclair Police Officer Travis Davis described several actions that his department is taking in the wake of public concern about what some claim are the township's dangerous roads and the need for more enforcement of speed limits and other traffic laws.

At the last First Ward meeting that Davis said he attended, the police department's traffic bureau was "bare-boned," adding, "We had one officer that worked inside, and another officer that was outside."

But the department has beefed up its traffic bureau, adding an additional officer starting on Monday, and has also received grant money to pay for overtime, from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., for officers on traffic details, according to Davis. There are even officers now patrolling on motorcycles, he said.

In addition, patrol units have been directed to conduct radar in areas that are considered problematic or dangerous, according to Davis.

"So we heard your complaints," he said. "We're addressing them. Unfortunately, we're restricted by our personnel and budgetary constraints."

But Davis assured residents that "we have been out there enforcing."

Assistant Township Manager Brian Scantlebury was also at the meeting, and he said the municipality is working on a pedestrian-safety education campaign. He said that this week he spoke to Katya Wowk, the township director of communications, and Lt. Stephanie Egnezzo, the police Traffic Bureau commander, about devising public-service announcements.

"What you will be seeing soon is PSAs being done regarding

traffic and pedestrian safety,” Scantlebury said. “And they’re [Wowk and Egnazzo] going to be meeting next week to come up with concepts that you will see on Channel 34, which you will see on social media, etc. So it should be reinforced and that’s what these PSAs are designed to do, to reinforce pedestrian and traffic safety.”

The comments came as the [Township Council is scheduled to vote next week](#) on a resolution that would reduce the speed limit on Grove Street to 30 mph from 35 mph. Pedestrian safety has been top of mind since Montclair resident Mary DeFilippis, 70, was struck by a vehicle and sustained fatal injuries June 7 while crossing Grove Street at its intersection with Chester Road.

Hurlock and at-Large Councilman Rich McMahon, who was also at the meeting, agreed that it would be too expensive to put flashing lights or new street lamps at every crosswalk along Grove Street, suggestions that some residents made at a recent council meeting.

“We do not have the money in this town to put a blinking yellow light at every crosswalk and have PSE&G come in and put bigger lights or more lights at every crosswalk,” Hurlock said.

The main safety issue is that often when a car stops for a pedestrian in a crosswalk, the vehicle behind it will pass on the right, endangering the pedestrian, according to McMahon. At the council meeting where reducing the Grove Street speed limit was discussed, half of the 24 residents who spoke cited that as a problem, not speeding, he said.

“It’s not that we don’t realize there’s a problem,” Hurlock said. “The bigger issue is how to fix it and what exactly is the cause of the problem ... I wish there was a quick fix, believe me.”

On Thursday one resident maintained that under New Jersey law, drivers must stop at “perceived crosswalks,” namely at any “T”

or four-way intersection for pedestrians, not just at crosswalks or traffic lights.

But Travis disagreed.

“We as law enforcement officers do not have any authority to issue anyone a summons for not stopping for someone if they’re not in a crosswalk,” the officer said. “That’s considered to be jay-walking.”

Travis said that a crosswalk must be marked and designated by lines.

“It’s a big problem in this town, and as much as we would like to be omnipresent at every crosswalk in town, it’s something that’s not really feasible,” he said, adding that people have to be more respectful of one another, whether they are behind the wheel or a pedestrian.

Hurlock voiced his support for the proposed [Driver and Pedestrian Mutual Responsibility Act](#), which aims “to balance the responsibility between drivers and pedestrians when pedestrians cross a roadway.” That legislation would roll back parts of a 2010 law regarding liability in such instances.

The proposed legislation is opposed by some safety groups, and was dubbed the “Get-out-of-the-way-or-get-hit” act by the New Jersey Bike & Walk Coalition.

## **BOND ISSUE**

At the meeting Ilmar Vanderer, a member of trustee of the Montclair Public Library and former president of the Friends of the Bellevue Library, briefed residents about a referendum question that will be on the ballot Nov. 7. If passed, it would permit the state to sell \$125 million in bonds to raise capital to distribute later on as grants to municipal and county libraries statewide for construction improvement, renovations and new technology, according to Vanderer.

As a library trustee, Vanderer said he wasn't allowed tell residents how to vote on the bond referendum. But he pointed out the Montclair library could use the money.



Ilmar Vanderer spoke about a library-bond referendum that is on the Nov. 7 ballot at the First Ward meeting Thursday night. It was held at the Bellevue Avenue branch of Montclair Public Library. LINDA MOSS/STAFF

“The library is in the midst currently of a strategic-planning process where we have been soliciting feedback and input from the community,” Vanderer said.

“Just last week we had a forum where people came and expressed

their ideas, what they'd like to see, how they'd like to see us transform the space to serve various constituencies here in town," he said. "And we live in a very diverse town where there are a lot of different constituencies, from seniors to millennials, everybody different. We want to make the library a space for everybody, for all of those constituencies, and these types of funds would help us to do that."

If the referendum passes it would create a matching-grant process, where libraries would apply for a grant and then have to raise private funds that would be matched 50-50 by the state, according to Vanderer.

Hurlock said he planned to vote "yes" on the referendum, adding that grant money the Montclair library received could be used to make the Bellevue Avenue branch compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA.

"It would, and that is a huge part of the goal, is ADA compliancy for this library, including an elevator and a lot of other modifications which would make it disabled accessible and ADA compliant," Vanderer said.

The plan for main library on South Fullerton Avenue "is to transform the interior into very innovative and exciting spaces for different groups to use," he said.

At the meeting Kathleen Bennett, chair of the Montclair Historic Preservation Commission, did a brief presentation on the restoration being done at the Bellevue Avenue library branch building, including work on its windows.