

Capitol Theatre -- Wilson Building demolition has detractors

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Thanks to its Sputnik-era metal siding, the Wilson Building may be one of the homeliest buildings in downtown Yakima.

It is also one of the oldest, built in 1902 at the busy corner of Yakima Avenue and Third Street by George Wilson, a Scottish immigrant and Yakima Valley pioneer whose descendants recently sold it to the neighboring **Capitol Theatre** for \$425,000.

Now, the 105-year-old building's days appear to be numbered, the victim of an ambitious **Capitol Theatre** expansion plan.

Steve Caffery, the theater's chief executive officer and the driving force behind the plan, wants to replace the Wilson with a new \$4.3 million building that would house a box office, a cafe or wine bar, administrative space and a 99-seat jazz club.

Built in what Caffery calls "Mediterranean colonial," the facility would also sport a marquee facing Yakima Avenue that is sure to become one of downtown's most visible elements.

As for the Wilson Building, Caffery said the theater looked at renovation but ultimately rejected the idea as too costly. The two-story building currently houses a gown and tuxedo shop and Kimmel Athletic Supply.

"Our engineers went through it twice, and the interior structure is just not capable," said Caffery. He cited the building's "limestone rubble" foundation, common in turn-of-the-century construction, as one factor in deciding to build rather than renovate.

The planned demolition is not without its detractors. Yakima's small preservation community may mobilize an effort to save the Wilson from the wrecking ball.

Downtown's "renaissance effort is all well and good, but it's not worth anything if you don't save your buildings," complained Jenifer Wilde- McMurtrie, a member of the city's fledgling Historic Preservation Commission.

"I mean, how much does this town need to lose before they wake up and salvage what they have?" she asked. "Preservation starts with the buildings. You've got to keep your buildings."

Freya Burgstaller, chairwoman of the preservation commission, said it's her belief that Caffery views the Wilson Building as "just a piece of garbage that you get rid of."

Politically, there isn't much standing in the way of demolition. The building's original, more ornate facade was covered in the 1950s and thus isn't apparent to the public. The city's Historic Preservation Commission also hasn't been very active and is still struggling to define its role in Yakima politics.

"We never have initiated something," Burgstaller said of the preservation commission. "I think maybe it's time we became more active."

Should it materialize, the debate over the building's future almost certainly will center on whether the **Capitol Theatre** made a good-faith effort at evaluating the building's potential.

Caffery said it did, and he cited Michael Sullivan, a co-principal of Tacoma-based Artifacts Consulting and one of the Northwest's leading preservation experts, as supportive of demolition, given what Caffery described as the building's modest historical value.

Both the theater and the Yakima Valley Museum, the region's historical society, said there is little documentation of the building's history and no archival drawings.

But Sullivan, a native of Yakima, describes any characterization of his support for demolition as "hyperextended." The building's metal facade needs to be removed before ruling out renovation, he said.

As ugly as it is, Sullivan said, the green metal facade - typical of remodeling efforts in the 1950s - may have protected important aspects of the building's original facade.

To proceed without peeling off the siding is a mistake, he said.

"It may not be there," he said of the building's original facade, "but they owe it to everybody to find out."

One person who doesn't have a problem with demolition is Fred Halverson, a local attorney and the great-grandson of George Wilson, who also built the imperiled, low-slung storefronts at Second and A streets owned by Yakima County.

Halverson and his sister, Linda Pennell of Los Angeles, sold the Wilson Building to the Capitol last year. He said the family supports the Capitol's expansion plans and sold the building knowing that it might be torn down.

"That building's worn out, I think," he said. "Nobody has an objection that I'm aware of in my family. If they're tearing it down, I don't have a problem with that."

Although the Capitol owns the building and can tear it down if it wants to, the city, which owns the theater, is a partner in the enterprise and as such has some say in the Wilson Building's future.

Not only does the city own the theater, it also controls access to the public funding that is needed to move the expansion project forward.

Said Michael Morales, deputy director of the city Department of Community and Economic Development: "What steps the City Council takes at that point is anybody's guess."

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