

Liberty Theatre Cultural Center

City Council Meeting

November 29, 2022

Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc. Board Request

On November 10, 2022, the Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc. Board unanimously voted to request the City of Columbus to revisit the proposal of ownership



Isaiah Hugley
City Manager
Columbus, Georgia
Georgia's First Consolidated Government
P.O. Box 1340 Columbus, GA 31902
Phone: (706) 653-4029 | Fax: (706) 653-4032
ihugley@columbusga.org

Dear Mr. City Manager,

As Chairwoman of the Board and on behalf of the Board of Directors of The Liberty Theatre and Cultural Center, I would like to thank you for your time in consideration of this email. The Board has taken an unanimously affirmative vote and would like to ask for the City of Columbus to revisit its 2020 proposal of ownership of the Liberty Theatre Cultural Center. We would like the current Board to transition into an Advisory Board for Programming and Fundraising efforts of the Liberty. We are hopeful and excited to work with the City on a clear plan to save a significant part of our Historic Culture!

Again, thank you for your time and thank you for all you do for our great City!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. Carr".

Delois Dee Carr
Board Chair,
Liberty Theatre Cultural Center

Board of Directors:

Delois Dee Carr, Chair
Ku'Wonna Ingram, Vice Chair and Secretary
Curtis West, Board Member
Jarvis Hamilton, Board Member



Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc.

- Request by District Councilor Mimi Woodson, and Councilors Toyia Tucker, Bruce Huff, and Pops Barnes are sponsoring this proposal



Liberty Theatre

- First opened its doors in 1924
- Closed in the 1970's due to decline, but reopened in 1996 after renovations
- Privately owned and operated by Liberty Theatre Cultural Center Inc.
- Last theater production was in 2016
- Priorities for the center include renovations, expansion, community involvement and sustainability
- Mission: To promote African American heritage, cultural and intellectual activities for the benefit and enjoyment of all who live in and visit the Columbus, Georgia area

History

- During the Jim Crow and segregation era in the United States, black/African Americans did not have equal access to public “White Only” establishments.
- The Liberty Theatre was built by Martin Movie Houses with a stage for musical performances and plays in 1924 at a cost of \$30,000, primarily for local Black/African Americans as a movie and vaudeville theater. It was a venue on the “Chitlin’ Circuit”.



History

- The “Chitlin’ Circuit” was a circuit of nightclubs and theaters that featured Black American performers and catered to Black American audiences.
- The Chitlin’ Circuit was the only option for touring Black entertainers such as Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Etta James, Billie Holiday, and many others.



History

- The Liberty theater was remodeled by the Martin Theatres Chain in 1956, to the plans of architect Rufus E. Bland.
- Integration led to the decline of the Liberty Theatre and its closing in 1973. Some documents report 1974. All reports agree that integration was the major cause.
- In March of 1980, the owners of the Liberty Theatre, Martin Theater Company, donated the theater to the William H. Spencer Golden Owlettes, Inc.



History

- It stood abandoned since 1973 until it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1984.
- In October of 1992, a bill was signed by President Bush for \$1 million to save the historic Liberty Theatre in Columbus, Georgia.
- In November of 1996 it reopened after a one and a half million-dollar renovation and is now called the Liberty Theatre Cultural Center, Inc.





Current Challenges

- No renovations in over 25 years
 - Roof leaks, water damage in theater, no lighting or sound system, no air conditioning, need new electric system, etc.
- No staff or funding to hire staff



Assessment in 2019

- Participation
 - City staff to include Engineering, Inspections & Code, and Public Works
 - Contractors = Roofing, Fire Alarm, Fire Protection and HVAC
 - Liberty Theatre engaged Brasfield & Gorrie
- Findings
 - Major roof issues
 - Severe water damage
 - Fire alarm and fire protection systems not in working order
 - HVAC units are at the end of the useful life
 - Electrical system repairs needed
 - Theater Lighting replacement
 - Theater A/V replacements
 - Kitchen renovation
 - Exterior improvements
 - Upgrade interior finishes
 - Paved access to loading dock
- Projected Budget = \$3 million



Since 2019...

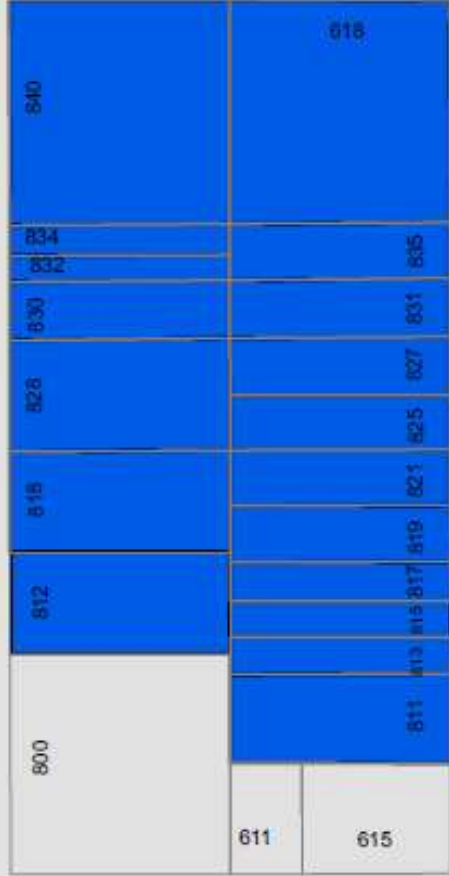
- Transfer of ownership in 2020 was requested and discussed but did not occur.
- Lost Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax Funding Opportunity in the November 2021 election
- Building is continuing to deteriorate



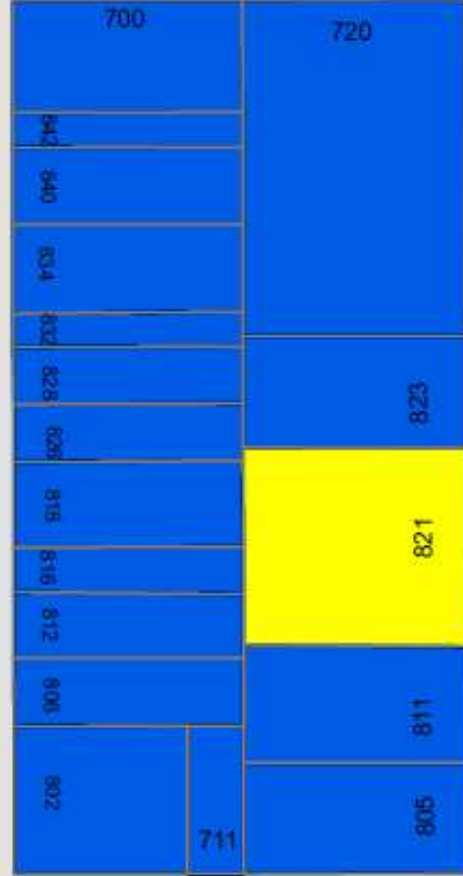
Why the City should accept ownership

- National Register of Historic Places since 1984
- Financial resources are required to restore this historic structure
- Preserve African American history in the Liberty District
- Anchor for the Liberty District
- Opportunity for programming events

6TH AVE



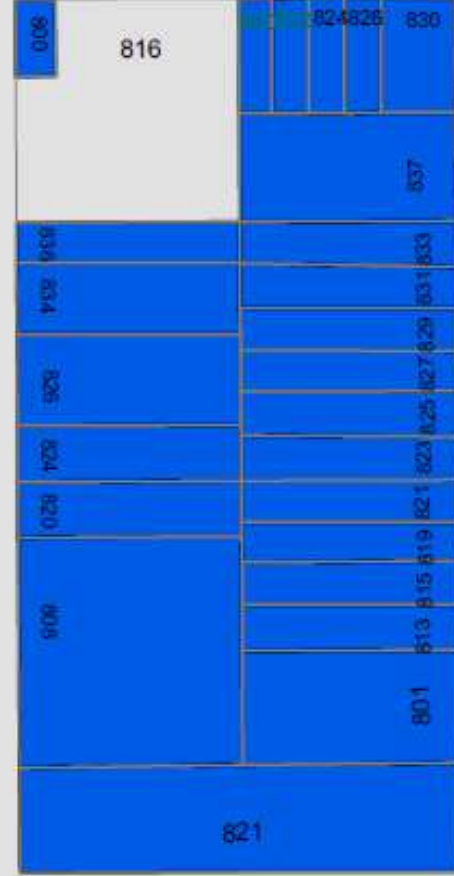
7TH AVE



8TH ST



8TH AVE



9TH AVE

Current Funding Opportunities

- One Georgia Special Purpose Award (DCA) - \$150,000
- Balance of Liberty District SPLOST Funds - \$300,000
- ARP Phase 2 Funding for Facility Improvements for Air Quality (HVAC) - TBD
- Save America's Treasures Grant – Up to \$750,000 (Due December 20, 2022)
- National Trust for Historic Preservation – African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund Grant – Up to \$150,000 (Letter of Intent due December 19, 2022)
- OLOST Infrastructure Future Allocation – TBD
- Columbus Building Authority Bonds – TBD
- TSPLOST Project for Streetscapes on 8th Ave. between 8th Street and 9th Street - \$4 million



November 2022 Considerations

- DCA grant requires that the property be owned by a public entity or have a long-term leasehold interest (99-year lease)
- Save America's Treasures Grant and American Cultural Heritage Action Fund Grant allows the City to apply if under the ownership of the City
- Option to assess the property and conduct a feasibility study if under City ownership
- Once renovated, consider using Civic Center staff for operations and programming



THE LIBERTY THEATRE

Next Steps

- December 2022
 - Determine acceptance of the ownership of the Liberty Theatre
 - District Councilor Mimi Woodson and Councilors Toyia Tucker, Bruce Huff and Pops Barnes are sponsoring this proposal
 - If ownership is transferred, apply for, and if awarded, accept a grant from the National Park Service, Save America's Treasures program and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund

THE LIBERTY THEATRE

QUESTIONS

