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## Downtown theater remains vacant despite several revitalization attempts

By Jeff Bollier

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When Carl Stapel first found work, it was as a stage manager at a theater.

Fond memories of those times have, in a way, kept the Time Cinema's ticket from being punched, Stapel's son Jim Stapel said.

"He has not been able to bring himself to level a theater," Stapel said. "It's just such a cool building."

But that hasn't helped the Stapel family, owners of Kitz and Pfeil True Value Hardware, to find a new user for the building since they purchased the two-screen theater at 445 N. Main St. 15 years ago. The biggest problem remains a restrictive covenant building's previous owner, Marcus Theaters, established that prohibited any use of the site as a theater for 25 years.

"I have had inquiries about using it as a theater, whether it's a second run theater or to remove seats and offer dinner theater, and they both sounded really interesting," Stapel said. "I think it would be great for downtown ... but, we've got that 25-year covenant."

Two years ago, Fever Pitch magazine head Kurt Stein proposed turning the Time into a multi-purpose venue for everything from old movies to live music acts and stage performances. The plan's backers got as far as obtaining a city liquor license, but then the plan fizzled.

Other, similar uses have been suggested, but one thing or another has always fallen through, said Oshkosh Chamber of Commerce Events Coordinator Stan Kline.

"(With Fever Pitch), it looked like there was a willing person to come in there and there was the hope of some financing behind it," said Kline, who worked on the project on behalf of the Downtown Oshkosh Business Improvement District. "But at that time, Marcus saw a change in what was happening in the movie market and they were a little wary of lifting the covenant."

Kline suggested Marcus may not have wanted "to help somebody lose money" in the film market, and recent failed ventures could support his argument. The Big Picture, a gigantic-screen theater in downtown Appleton, closed on Oct. 15 after 18 months in business and the \$7 million Springz entertainment complex in the Appleton area took just four months to close its doors.

"It would have to be a special project to work," Kline said.

Stapel said there is a possibility the building could be converted into a basic storefront with upper-floor apartments, but he said the loss of the theater would eliminate one more potential entertainment draw to help downtown Oshkosh's revitalization efforts.



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The former Time Cinema Building now vacant at 445 North Main Street in Oshkosh. *Northwestern photo by Larry Crane*  
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"It could utilize downtown at a time of day when it's not utilized very heavily and I think it just would be fun to have," Stapel said. "I know we'd all love to see it remain a theater. There are a ton of fun things to do down here with the Library and the Grand (Opera House) and the Leach (Amphitheater) and the Art Walk. It could add one more piece to the effort to make downtown a vibrant entertainment area."

Marcus Theaters officials did not return messages as of press time.

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