

NEWS *from Middletown, Pa.*

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Elks Theater to close to allow for needed repairs

The Elks Theater in Middletown will be closing indefinitely following a decision Wednesday by the Middletown Industrial and Commercial Development Authority to proceed immediately with repairs needed to address building code and life safety issues in the 100-plus year old building.

The decision came following the receipt of an 11-page report from a contractor hired to evaluate conditions in the building, which the ICDA acquired late last year.

Following the vote to proceed with the code and life safety issue repairs, the ICDA notified the Greater Middletown Economic Development Corporation (GMEDC) its lease of the theater is being terminated. Sal Bauccio, the ICDA's solicitor, said the ICDA is targeting April 15 as a closing date but will work with GMEDC to pick an exact date that will allow for an orderly closing.

Bauccio said the ICDA plans to address the code violations while it continues to seek a permanent operator for the building. At that same meeting, Phantom Theater Company made a presentation to the ICDA about its proposal to operate the theater. The ICDA will be posting a Request for Qualifications seeking proposals from other potential operators.

"We need to address these codes and life safety issues, and we need to make it a functional building again. That is paramount," said Bauccio. "We will engage in the permanent repairs and build out of the facility once the right operator is found."

Among the issues uncovered with the theater portion of the building were exit doors and panic bars on exit doors that are not working, emergency lighting units that are not functional, and issues surrounding the structural soundness and function of the fire escape from the upper level.

The inspection also found issues with the service entrance wiring at the fire escape, which it says "poses and electrocution hazard."

Other electrical issues were identified. The "electrical power and lighting system is in major disrepair," the report states, citing panels that are not marked as to their functions, questionable fusing configurations, and wiring that is in "general disrepair."

Structurally, deficiencies were found in floor joists under the first floor, with some of them showing evidence of failure. There is also a hole in the floor in the women's restroom and asbestos pipe insulation is present in that part of the building.

Also identified as problem areas were the projection room, which has egress and electrical issues, crumbling concrete in the building's façade, and the stage curtain which is very old and believed to be made of flammable materials.

The report also mentions issues that had been previously identified but not addressed, such as the falling plaster in the ceiling and emergency aisles that are cluttered because they are being used as storage areas.

The report also cites a number of public safety concerns in the rest of the building, including electrical and wiring issues, malfunctioning or missing emergency and exit lights, asbestos pipes, breaks in the basement fire walls between the three storefront units, and signs of water in the basement.