

With \$65 million renovation soon underway, Congress Theater looks to reopen in 2019



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Michael Moyer's memories of the Congress Theater include taking his son, then in the fifth grade, to a Billy Idol concert.

The Logan Square institution closed in 2013 after a string of code violations, but Moyer is leading an investment group that plans to start a \$65 million renovation in the next three to four months, with a goal of reopening the 1920s-era building in 2019.

“This will be a live music venue again,” said Moyer, who estimates that 75 to 125 shows a year will be performed at the theater, visible from the Blue Line, on what for years had been a lonely stretch of Milwaukee Avenue.

The Congress Theater, which has hosted musical acts such as Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis, was named this year to the National Register of Historic Places. The theater — one of more than 200 venues throwing their doors open to the public this weekend as part of the Chicago Architecture Foundation’s free Open House Chicago festival — was designated a city landmark in 2002.

The Congress Theater redevelopment will include a 32-room inn as well as 14 apartments that had been low-income housing but are now vacant.

All 14 of those units will remain affordable housing after the renovation, said Raymond Valadez, chief of staff to Ald. Proco “Joe” Moreno, 1st.

Also being finalized is tax increment financing for the project, Valadez said.



Andy Tinucci with Woodhouse Tinucci Architects and Michael Moyer, owner and developer with New Congress LLC, speak about upcoming renovations to the Congress Theater in its main lobby in Chicago on Oct. 10, 2017. Though its opening is pushed back to 2019, the theater will be part of Open House Chicago, which runs Oct. 14-15. (Jose M. Osorio / Chicago Tribune)

The theater lobby won't change much, but "we're going to poke two holes through the lobby walls into the adjacent buildings so when there's not a performance happening" the lobby of the inn can expand into the theater lobby, said Andy Tinucci, the project's architect.

"You can have cafe tables here," Tinucci said while standing in the lobby, with its grand staircase in the background. "This can be something that more than just theatergoers can experience." The other side could include a restaurant, he said.

Moyer said many Chicago venues, when there's not a show occurring, keep their lobbies closed to the public.

He should know.

Earlier, Moyer and the Van Kampen family, which made its fortune in the mutual fund industry, bought the Cadillac Palace Theatre from the Wirtz family, owners of the Chicago Blackhawks. They restored the 1926 building, reopened it in 1999 and still own the venue, considered a gem in Chicago's theater district. The Van Kampen family isn't involved in the Congress project and is now sole owner of the Cadillac Palace, Moyer said.

Moyer said he's working with two operators to help develop the food and beverage, retail, and entertainment aspects of the Congress Theater project. The operators will be announced in coming months, he said.



Light fixtures hang in the main lobby of the Congress Theater in Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood. An investment group has plans to start a \$65 million renovation in the next three to four months, with a goal of reopening the 1920s-era building in 2019. (Jose M. Osorio / Chicago Tribune)

The venue, whose renovation also will be financed with historic tax credits, bank debt and private equity, will accommodate about 3,500 for general admission shows and 2,600 for shows with seating.

Scaffolding now covers the front of the building.

The domed auditorium will include a tiered floor “so you’ll be able to stand behind me and see,” said 6-foot-6 Moyer.

The balcony still has its seats, of which there are about 900.

The original organ lofts will be new places to view a performance. An old projection room will be turned into a VIP viewing area and lounge. The curtain is currently down due to the removal of asbestos.

“All the hazardous material has been abated,” Tinucci said.

For ambience, a backstage lighting panel will be moved to a planned “speakeasy” in what’s now a mechanical room under the lobby.

“We won’t be calling it this, but the working name of it is the Electric Room,” Moyer said.

Infrastructure improvements will include new plumbing.

The goal is to ensure the building lasts another 100 years, Tinucci said

Moyer originally announced the plans in 2015, with an expected opening date of this year. He said the delay was partly caused by the death of one of his partners.

“Another aspect that has delayed our original timeline has been the amount of time that we have spent on the drawings,” Moyer said. “You want to make your mistakes on paper.”

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