Daly's $317,000 puts Bindlestiff back in business

Supe's clout ensures full buildout for struggling SoMa theater

BY TOM CARTER

BINDLESTIFF Theater got $317,000 closer toward realizing its dream of occupying the theater shell at the Plaza Apartments, an empty 4,409-square-foot space that awaits buildout for the peripatetic performance company.

The San Francisco Redevelopment Agency Commission on June 20 voted to add that amount for the buildout budget of the theater at 185 Sixth St.

The nation's only Pilipino performing arts theater occupied the space in the building before Redevelopment bought the Plaza Hotel in 2000 and renovated it. Under an agreement, Bindlestiff, which moved to a location around the corner, was supposed to come up with $500,000 for tenant improvements.

At the June meeting, Bindlestiff board member Alex Torres said the group was very close to the goal. Funds included $100,000 from the Mayor's Office of Economic Development that came in May, $60,000 from the Mayor's Office for Community Development, donations, leftover money from its original contract and matching funds.

PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Alex Torres, *Bindlestiff board member: "We have … a groundswell of support now."*

By the board's calculation, Torres said, $317,000 was needed to complete the buildout.

Supervisor Chris Daly urged the commission in a letter to fund the buildout. "Over the last few years, I have reiterated my position that the Redevelopment Agency should, as promised, ensure the rebuild of Bindlestiff Theater," he wrote. "While the new space promises to be a great improvement from the small black box theatre that was Bindlestiff before the renovation of the Plaza, the Agency should make good on your promise not to displace Bindlestiff despite the organizational limitations of this small grassroots organization."

Daly is also chairman of the supes' Budget and Finance Committee.

Redevelopment project manager Mike Grisso had suggested $250,000 but the commission went with the $317,000 figure. If the Board of Supervisors approves the budget with the additional money this month, the next step is for Bindlestiff and Grisso to work out a lease agreement.

"We have a certain momentum, a groundswell of support now," Torres said in an interview. "If we don't do it now, who knows what will happen." ■

Move to halt $500,000 SoMa SROs

➤ *CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1*

months of pay stubs to prove it, the asking rent was $700.

Elberling now serves on the Western SoMa Citizens Planning Task Force, which advises City Planning on a 20-block area that takes in 77 Bluxome and four other sites that are on the books to become privately developed SROs.

"The developers are happily exploiting the loophole," said task force Chair Jim Meko. He sees this as a parallel to the live-work experiment from the same era. It was supposed to be for poor artists working where they lived but the spaces got "sold as $1 million condominiums," he said. And minicondos, he said, will be snapped up by "yuppies from Singapore."

Because of whom they have served historically, SROs get breaks on planning restrictions. The definition of an SRO is 350 square feet maximum with no density limit for units. They can go to 400 square feet if they have a bathroom and kitchen. About a third of what other residential open space requires is required for SROs, and only one parking place for 20 units instead of the usual one-for-one. There is no exposure requirement for SRO units, either, such as facing an alley, street, yard or courtyard.

"We will consider interim controls in our July meeting to shut it (the trend) down," Meko says. "I'm hoping the Planning Commission will do this. After all, it's their code that's being exploited by this loophole."

Market-rate SROs fly in the face of affordable-housing advocates who want low-income people to find housing.

But developers see little condos as an ownership opportunity allowing the young middle class to stay in the city and "get a piece of the rock," as Noe Valley real estate agent Raul Arriaza says. He is part-owner of 149 Dore St., now a vacant lot, where eight SRO units are planned.

"If it's built, it can be a starter place, affordable ownership, some equity," Arriaza says. "Plus it adds to the tax base of the city. I see it as a win-win situation. I don't know why people would be against it. It brings more housing that's needed."

A living room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom all in one space can be "a great beginning." But he said he had no idea what a condo that size would fetch in the marketplace.

A subcommittee of Meko's task force estimated they would go for $400,000-$500,000.

Arriaza's costly four-year process to get the project this far along is stymied now by the city and he says he won't set prices "until we know what we can do."

What's holding up these and dozens of other projects is an unofficial moratorium on condo building referred to as "2660." In March, the Board of Supervisors reversed a Planning Commission decision that had exempted a condo project at 2660 Harrison St. from an environmental impact report. The supes told the developers to do the impact study themselves and determine what effect the project would have on blue-collar jobs and affordable housing in the area.

The Planning Department declared the ruling would apply to more than 50 similar projects. So now, developers can wait in line for the department to do the impact study — some say it will take nearly a year — or they can do the expensive review themselves.

Attorney Sue Hestor led the successful appeal of 2660 before the board, saying the city didn't know the impact of this and other changes in the eastern neighborhoods, according to an April 12 Examiner story on the construction halt. The city is overbuilt with market-rate housing and lagging on affordable housing, Hestor said. If the limited available land is gobbled up by private developers, especially in industrial zones, she warned, nothing will be left.

Once land goes to residential it never gets turned back, Meko points out. He worries that service-light-industry areas south of Harrison are being lost and the mixed character of the greater neighborhood sacrificed. Indeed, a strip of land off a cul de sac at 8 McLea Court in the task force's area is zoned SLI, and it is to become a 40-foot building with 30 market-rate SRO units.

In the suspended meantime, the Planning Department is working up a study to be ready in the fall on what effect new market-rate housing has on affordable housing. Amendments to the Planning Code are on several supervisors' desks awaiting the result.

The Breidinger brothers' Bluxome Street condos have avoided the current uncertainty among developers. For now, they intend to rent units from $800 to $1,200 monthly, a boost from the $750-$1,000 Charles Breidinger quoted to the Chronicle in March 2005. Ten of Bluxome's 102 units will, by inclusionary law, be priced below market rate.

Breidinger told the Chronicle's Charlie Goodyear there was "tremendous demand for smaller units by single people" who were priced out of buying a $500,000-$600,000 condo.

At the time, Supervisor Tom Ammiano tried to push affordability down even further. He proposed an ordinance limiting SRO rentals to people making less than $39,000 a year, but the Planning Commission didn't support the idea and it didn't fly.

Now Breidinger is wavering on his four-story project at 1140 Howard with the 350-square-foot larger units, which City Planning whittled down from five stories.

"I'm not sure we would rent them, or if we'll be able to proceed," he says. "It's on hold like a lot of projects. The area is being rezoned, the inclusionary may jump to 20% and more fees may be added, plus interest rates are rising as are building costs. We'll have to wait to see how it shakes out." ■