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BDC's Brodie defends Senator plan

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The historic Senator Theatre in Northeast Baltimore will be preserved regardless of the group selected to acquire and renovate the structure, according to the city's top economic development official.

Baltimore Development Corp. President M.J. "Jay" Brodie, in a letter he provided to the **Baltimore Business Journal**, said he is confident in the city's ability to "ensure the long-term protection of this historic gem."

The BDC's efforts have come under fire by a group calling itself the Friends of the Senator, which has launched a letter-writing campaign to ensure the building's unique historic characteristics are preserved if the city sells the building.

An advisory panel assembled by the BDC is weighing proposals from two groups to buy and renovate the moviehouse.

Members of the Friends group have sent more than 100 letters to Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake accusing the BDC of mismanagement by not seeking out an historic preservationist familiar with preserving older movie theaters to help with the selection process.

Brodie, responding to one of those letter writers, defended his agency's actions and said the BDC has not conducted its evaluation process "under an inappropriate shroud of secrecy and intrigue." The agency has tried to seek as much public feedback as possible throughout the process, Brodie wrote, including on the initial solicitation the BDC issued in seeking prospective buyers.

Brodie, who could not be reached for comment on the letter, said the city's Commission for Historical and Architectural Preservation has control over any exterior or internal renovations made to the building. What's more, he said, each of the building's prospective buyers have said they plan to seek historic tax credits to help finance their renovations, and the conditions tied with those tax credits would impose additional restrictions on the building's future alterations.

Not everyone is convinced about the city's ability to protect the building's historic qualities. Among the city's critics is Karen Noonan, president of the Theatre Historical Society of America and former member of the advisory panel. Noonan, who resigned from the panel due to time constraints, said she understands the BDC must consider a number of factors when considering the building's sale, with others including economic impact and job creation. But she said she fears the building's preservation is not being given enough weight in that evaluation.

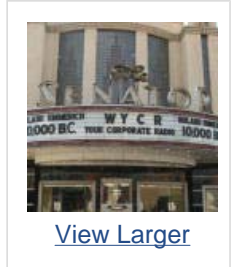
"They're not just looking at it from a historic theater standpoint, they're looking at it from a million different aspects," she said in a telephone interview. "We just need to take the extra step for security, because once it's done, you don't want to hand it off to the wrong choice."

The balance between historic preservation and economic development is one the BDC has tried to strike in other projects as well, including the so-called superblock on Baltimore's west side. The developer selected for that project has proposed demolishing a number of buildings the city agreed to preserve under an agreement with the Maryland Historical Trust, raising concerns from preservation groups across the country.

"It's clear, to us, that the BDC needs somebody who can anticipate those kinds of controversies," Baltimore Heritage Executive Director Johns Hopkins said in a telephone interview. Hopkins, among those who has written a letter to Rawlings-Blake advocating for the Senator's preservation, said he believes the BDC should consider appointing an historic preservation expert to its board of directors. That, he said, could help the BDC avoid much of the controversy it attracts with projects like the Senator's redevelopment.

The Senator's last owner had defaulted on a loan from First Mariner Bancorp, which planned to foreclose and sell the property at an auction last spring. The city, which guaranteed a portion of the loan, stepped in to buy the debt from First Mariner and purchased the structure itself in December for \$810,000.

In September, the BDC offered the property up to potential buyers and the economic development agency received four bids for the 17,868-square-foot Govanstown building. An advisory panel selected two as finalists, one by Charles Theatre owners James "Buzz" Cusack Jr. and Kathleen C. Cusack, and another by Towson University's WTMD public radio station.



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