

WEST SIDE SUN NEWS

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City loan to help restore Variety Theater

By Joe Noga
Staff Writer

As a child, Ward 19 Councilwoman Dona Brady says she walked to the Variety Theater on Lorain Avenue every Sunday to take in double feature matinees.

Soon, Brady and others in her West 117th Street neighborhood could again be enjoying a cinematic double dip at the Variety.

City leaders approved legislation Oct. 1 granting a \$170,000 loan to the Friends of the Historic Variety Theater to purchase property across the street for a parking lot. The loan is the latest step

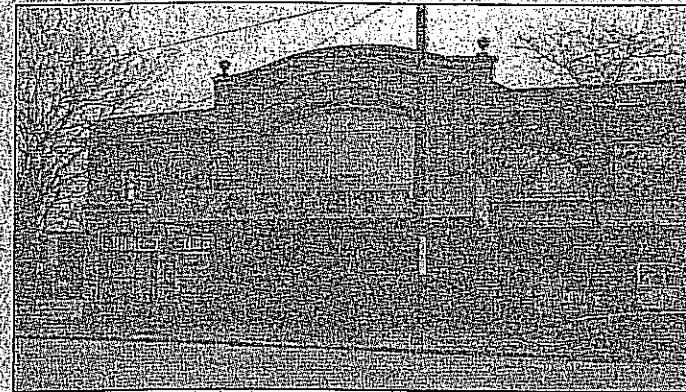
in restoring the empty landmark theater and converting it into a new neighborhood arts and cultural center.

"Everybody is excited about this project," Brady said. "It's really going to transform the neighborhood."

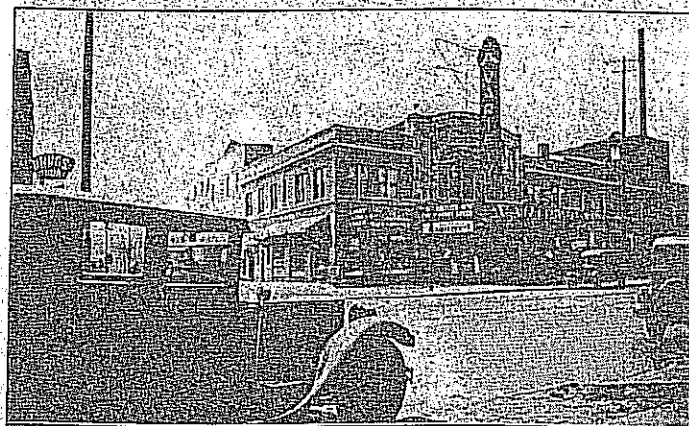
Local officials say they are looking to acquire at least one more nearby building to be razed for additional parking and hope to select an architect for the project by the end of the month.

Westown Community Development Corporation leaders and their project

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City Council recently approved a \$170,000 loan for the purchase of property for parking lots to be used in the renovation of the historic Variety Theater on Lorain Avenue.



The historic Variety Theater on Lorain Road closed in 1984.

Variety

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consultant, Longwell and Associates, say the renovation price tag could fall between \$5 million and \$8 million.

"There are so many variables right now, but based on what other theaters have done, we think that's a reasonable estimate," said Gretchen Moore, Westown commercial program director.

Warner Brothers opened the Variety Theater in the 1920s, and it became an inde-

pendent theater in the 1950s. Lack of off-street parking and the high cost of utilities and other expenses for a single-screen theater forced the Variety to close in 1984.

On Monday, Moore signed a contract for \$110,000 with Wagner Electric of Elyria to manufacture a new marquee and vertical sign based on historic photos of the originals. Plans for the marquee had to be approved by state officials because the building is part of the national historic building registry.

Funding for the restoration project is coming from several

areas. Moore said Westown was awarded a grant from the Neighborhood Retail Assistance Program to cover part of the cost of the marquee, along with money from the Community Development Block Grant program and more than \$20,000 in private donations.

Brady said the project ties in strongly to the Lorain Avenue master plan, which is completed and ready to be adopted.

In addition to movies, Brady envisions the 1,980-seat theater hosting corporate events, graduations and live theater, including cultural

workshops for children.

She said the Variety Theater project has generated tremendous support throughout the neighborhood, much the same way the Detroit Shoreway neighborhood has rallied around the restoration of the Capital Theater there.

Brady pointed to Target and Giant Eagle as businesses that are beginning to invest in the area surrounding the Variety in anticipation of the renovation project.

"They know that this is going to be a catalyst for bringing back the neighborhood," she said.