

MEDIA RELEASE

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Sawtell Cinema Set to Rise Again

A giant step has been taken toward saving the much-loved Sawtell Cinema. A group of local backers, acting as The Sawtell Cinema Group, closed a contract this week with the current owner, Barry Brissett, to purchase the building.

The deal is contingent on approval of a DA to renovate the historic theatre. The intention of the Sawtell Cinema Group is to incorporate modern comfort and technology, whilst retaining the 1940s façade and ambiance held dear by generations of locals and visitors.

The cinema was put on the market in March 2012, and the last movie was screened on 30 December, 2012. Locals feared that their cherished movie house might become yet another shop front or café on Sawtell's already crowded First Avenue strip.

The current move to save the cinema is the brainchild of local Sawtellian, Stephanie Ney. She enrolled in the School for Social Entrepreneurs (SSE) in March 2014 with the express purpose of finding a way to return the Sawtell Cinema to the community. She successfully enrolled interested locals in her dream and a plan began to take shape.

"When I started talking to people about the idea of saving the cinema I was overwhelmed by offers to help. It seemed that the whole community was desperate for this to happen," says Stephanie.

Oliver Gee was married in the Sawtell Cinema, so Stephanie's idea of saving the cinema was music to the Gee family's ears. Their business g2 architects, has contributed hours of architectural time, creating the initial ideas and plans for renovation. Accountant Denis Jeff had already been looking for ways to save the cinema when Stephanie approached him. He conceived the idea of establishing a property trust and worked tirelessly with Stephanie to seek out backers willing to stump up the cash to acquire the cinema.

A total of 19 people stepped forward to invest. These angel investors all share a passion for cinema in general and the Sawtell Cinema in particular. Largely local, 17 of the 19 investors own property in Sawtell. For many, the cinema's presence was an important fact in the decision to live in Sawtell.

This will not be the first time the cinema has been saved by the community. When the cinema closed after the floods of 2009 a group of citizens, known as the Friends of the Sawtell Cinema, stepped forward to ensure the doors would be reopened.

Jill Nash spearheaded the establishment of the Friends, and is playing a leading role yet again. One of the first to put her hand up to invest, she is now chairing the Board of the Sawtell Cinema Group.

“I’m just so thrilled to see the community responding again. The goodwill out there is astounding,” says Jill.

Asked if she was excited that the contract has finally been closed she responds with cautious enthusiasm. “It’s wonderful that we have come this far. But we need to remember that the job is only just beginning and there are plenty of hurdles ahead.”

The first hurdle will be getting the DA through Coffs Harbour City Council, and Jill cautions that it may take weeks before it becomes clear that the project will actually proceed. Assuming the DA is approved and the sale finalised, then the real work begins.

“This is a community project and we will be looking to the community for their strength and support throughout this process,” says Jill. But for now the community must wait with fingers crossed, as Council decides the fate of this grassroots effort to revive a local icon.

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Sawtell Cinema’s final screening 30 December, 2014. Or maybe not?