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Recreating the Avon



Stamford Mayor Caroline Simmons, Phil Cerrone, Lewis Jacobson, Arthur Selkowitz, Susan Cullman, First Bank of Greenwich President & CEO Frank Gaudio. Photo by Bob Capazzo.

BY ANNE W. SEMMES

For 25 years the Avon Theater has served as a cultural icon in downtown Stamford, featuring independent films, documentaries, and engaging conversations on the art of films. All thanks go to Greenwich's own Deborah and Chuck Royce, for as the story was told in this newspaper it was their romance that kicked off the 2001 rescue and revival of the 1939 theater that began its showings with that classic, "It's A Wonderful Life."

Chuck Royce would share the impetus for reviving the Avon Theater. "Deborah had been in the acting world, and this project came along, and I said, let's take a look, have

fun with it." "We were dating," said Deborah, "and Chuck proposed that we purchase and restore this cinema." That effort would kick off the Royces' impressive history of restoring historic places.

But now with the Avon closed - while offering its "Avon-on-Tour" free screenings at "partner venues" such as the Bruce Museum - the Theater is to be imaginatively recreated as the Deborah and Chuck Royce Cinema Arts Center, with three theaters, an Education Center, a café and wine bar, enhanced accessibility, and more. That recreating was addressed last Wednesday week morning before some 100 enthusiasts, supporters, and local leaders gathered in front of the Theater - with that new Cinema

Arts Center said to be realized come October of 2027.

"This milestone reflects years of planning, fundraising, collaboration in what the Avon means to Stamford and Fairfield County," introduced Peter H. Gistelinck, Avon executive director. "So, I'm delighted to share that our capital campaign has now surpassed \$15 million," with the goal of \$18 million. Gistelinck spoke of the three theaters to have "the latest projection and sound technology... and all new seating," with "the whole project fully approved by the Historic Preservation Council."

Susan Cullman, co-chair of the Avon board of directors, stepped up with, "Today we are the only theater in Fairfield County



Lewis Jacobson, Susan Cullman, Arthur Selkowitz, Mayor Caroline Simmons. Photo by Bob Capazzo.

dedicated to showing independent films and documentaries.

The Avon is the anchor here, not just Bedford Street, but also Stamford. It has an economic impact on the city. We have 3,000 members and each year brings an incremental \$400,000 to the businesses in downtown, the restaurants and other businesses." She added, "Our goal is not only to bring the Avon into the 21st century, but also to create long-term financial sustainability for the theater so that it is here for generations to come."

Stamford Mayor Caroline Simmons was introduced by Avon Board of Directors Co-Chair Arthur Selkowitz. "She has brought energy, fresh ideas and enthusiasm back to our city aided by a solid team."

Simmons praised the Avon co-chairs for their "vision and leadership in taking on this project in addition to many other causes you support in our city from Mill River to other boards and initiatives." She also wished to give a "shout out to our state delegation as well as I see many members of our board of representatives here. We were able to get

\$500,000 [to the Avon Capital Campaign] through our city budget. Thank you so much for supporting that."

Simmons cited the Avon as "truly an iconic cultural gem in our city - one of the few remaining independent theaters in the region. It's part of the heart and soul of our downtown. It's part of what makes Bedford Street and Stamford downtown such a vibrant place to bring your family, to go to a restaurant and to come enjoy a movie."

"But more importantly," she added, "It's a major source of joy and inspiration as part of our arts and culture initiative in our city. We all know the joy you feel from going to a movie and we can't wait to see that joy spread across generations for many years to come."

In thanking the mayor for her comments Selkowitz noted, "It's the first time ever that the city has given capital funds to this theater." He also thanked "our founders, Deborah and Chuck Royce, who had the vision, determination and leadership to rescue the Avon from near destruction... To the Avon Board of Directors, you have

always had my back even when we had to go back and ask for more funding to get this done. To our executive director, Peter Gistelinck...for driving all of this and keeping an eagle eye on our finances." And lastly, "To our banker, Frank Gaudio of the First Bank of Greenwich who trusts us enough to backstop us with a generous line of credit should we need it."

Selkowitz's praise was also given "To our architects, engineers and our construction manager, the Ashforth Company led by Tom Walsh who have all guaranteed that we will end up with a world-class theater on budget. To Greg Lodato, our partner and partial landlord who understood our vision and has invested in it."

The finale was a "groundbreaking ceremony," with the following persons asked to come forward to the "shovel station:" Mayor Simmons, Tom Walsh, Monica Avila, Lewis Jacobsen, Phil Cerrone, Frank Gaudio, Peter Gistelinck and Susan Cullman... "So, thank you all for coming and helping us celebrate. Let the fun begin."