

**Ritz Theatre Readiness Plan  
Updated February 2020**

*The Historic Ritz Theatre is owned and operated by the City of Toccoa. It is managed through Main Street Toccoa, a municipally-operated economic development support infrastructure system. A part-time General Manager provides oversight, booking, and general upkeep of the structure.*

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## History of the Ritz Theatre

The Historic Ritz Theatre is located on both the National and Georgia Registers of Historic Places. The Ritz Theatre was originally constructed in 1939 by Mr. Fred McLendon, a regional innovator, as a single-screen movie theatre. Currently, it stands as one of only two McLendon theatres still in operation: The other being the Buckhead Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia. McLendon designed the Ritz Theatre to embody the “glitz” and “glamor” of Hollywood in rural Georgia.

The Ritz Theatre closed its doors in the 1970s, unable to maintain funding necessary for its operation. Upon its closure, it was sold to the Currahee Arts Council, who later renamed it the Schaefer Center. Under the purview of the Currahee Arts Council, and through generous donations from supporters of the arts, the Schaefer Center played host predominately to community theatrical productions and non-profit ventures. The Currahee Arts Council made several initial renovations to the structure, including the restoring of the building’s wood floors and removal of carpet in the lobby.

Despite the optimistic surge in the 1980s, the Schaefer Center soon fell into declining use. To save in façade repair costs, the original Art Deco Moderne façade was covered with a brick veneer, and with the iconic marquee long removed, effectively turned the Schaefer Center into a thoroughly utilitarian structure.

In 2012, Main Street Toccoa began to work with the Currahee Arts Council to make necessary repairs to the Schaefer Center. The original HVAC system, now over 25 years old, was completely replaced with Rural Business Development Grant Funding from the United States Department of Agriculture, and a Conditions Assessment Report was produced with grant funding from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. The City of Toccoa, through Main Street Toccoa, assisted with interior renovations to the auditorium, lobby, and dressing rooms. Ultimately, historically-identical carpet was installed and the structure was designed to evoke the feeling of the original 1939-esque Ritz Theatre. Most importantly, the City of Toccoa worked with the Currahee Arts Council and the Fox Theatre Institute to remove the brick veneer on the front of the structure and restore the original Art Deco Moderne Façade, including through the application of a historically-accurate paint scheme.

In 2014, the Currahee Arts Council sold the Schaefer Center to the City of Toccoa, during which the City of Toccoa began extensive renovation work. In 2016, the Fox Theatre Institute once again provided funding to the Schaefer Center, this time to install an historically-appropriate marquee to the front of the structure. This marquee was unveiled at 2016’s “Puttin’ on the Ritz,” whereupon the Schaefer Center began to do operation as the Historic Ritz Theatre at the Schaefer Center, commonly shorted to Historic Ritz Theatre. In 2016, over 120 shows were held at the Ritz Theatre, with over 20,000 in attendance.

In 2017, a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission provided funding for a state-of-the-art sound system, which included surround sound capability, assisted listening, wireless monitoring, and ClearCom capability. 90 shows were held at the Ritz Theatre in 2017, with over 15,000 in attendance. Since this time, the Ritz Theatre regularly hosts over 100 shows a year with over 16,000 in attendance.

In 2019, the Ritz Theatre renovated its basement dressing rooms and plaza, and restored the balcony, including the restoration of 90 original 80-year old seats with funding from the United States Department of Agriculture.

Since taking over operation of the Ritz Theatre, Main Street Toccoa has leveraged city funding with grant funding to provide renovations to the structure, ultimately receiving the coveted 2017 Chairman's Award for Excellence in Rehabilitation from the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation, the nation's largest non-profit preservation organization. Main Street Toccoa has also received funding from the Georgia Council for the Arts, South Arts, and the Fox Theatre Institute to assist with programming expenses for the theatre.



**Ritz Theatre- Circa 1959**



**Ritz Theatre- Circa 2016**



**Schaefer Center- Circa 2012**



**Schaefer Center- Circa 2014**



Ritz Theatre at the Schaefer Center- Circa 2017



## **Main Street Toccoa**

With the advent of the 1960s, large shopping malls began to compete with local brick-and-mortar businesses. Many downtowns, once thriving and full of activity, fell into economic decline.

As an answer to the depressed conditions in downtowns, Toccoa erected concrete canopies in its historic downtown district, closing off the area to vehicular traffic and effectively creating a covered pedestrian mall. In less than ten years, it was evident that, instead of enhancing businesses and creating a positive downtown image, these canopies actually accelerated the downtown's decline.

In an effort to revitalize Downtown Toccoa, community leaders organized Main Street Toccoa in 1990. A year later, the Georgia Department of Community Affairs recommended that the canopies be removed and that the street be opened once again to vehicular traffic. However, Toccoa did not have political support at this time for so vast a project.

During the next 15 years, Main Street Toccoa implemented many changes and improvements to the downtown mall, doing its best to bring economic vitality back to the stagnated downtown district. However, businesses continued to flounder, and many storefronts, once vibrant and full of life, were empty and in disrepair.

Over time, with growing grassroots support, approval was given to start the canopy removal project. The city secured funding of \$1.4 million from several state and federal agencies to begin removal of the canopies. The City of Toccoa also provided additional funds to complete the canopy removal and street opening project.

Demolition began in February 2007 and the response was overwhelmingly positive. Interest in the historic downtown area began to grow as more businesses realized the potential of a revitalized downtown district. Today, Downtown Toccoa looks not entirely unlike how it looked 50 or even 100 years ago. The street is once again welcoming to both pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and the establishment of a Historic Preservation Commission has contributed to an historically accurate, yet vibrant, Downtown Toccoa.

The City of Toccoa's acquisition of the Ritz Theatre in 2014 gave Main Street Toccoa another opportunity to increase revitalization in Downtown Toccoa through the use of the Ritz Theatre as an economic anchor in Downtown Toccoa. Since its acquisition by the city, the Historic Ritz Theatre has contributed to economic vitality in Downtown Toccoa through its use as the primary medium for promoting the arts in Northeast Georgia and establishing Downtown Toccoa as a destination location for music, movies, and more.

## Current Operation

The Historic Ritz Theatre at the Schaefer Center is currently operated by the staff of Main Street Toccoa. Staff includes:

- **Connie Tabor, Community Development Director:** Connie has worked with the City of Toccoa since becoming its Main Street Manager in 1990. Connie provides oversight, budget allocation, and direction to staff in the operation and upkeep of the Ritz Theatre.
- **Christian Hamilton, Main Street Manager:** Christian became the City of Toccoa's Main Street Manager in 2017, and through this role, provides management of Toccoa's Main Street program. As part of his responsibilities, he provides grant writing and project management for any grant projects at the Historic Ritz Theatre.
- **Tami Mayhugh, Ritz Theatre General Manager:** Tami became the City of Toccoa's Ritz Theatre General Manager in 2019. Her responsibilities include Ritz Theatre operations, booking, maintenance, and more. She is the primary contact at the Ritz Theatre.
- **Sharon Crosby, Special Events Coordinator:** Sharon has worked with the City of Toccoa since 2007. She is the primary events planner for any Main Street-sponsored activity at the Historic Ritz Theatre.
- **Vicky King, Community Development Assistant/Graphics:** Vicky provides office management and graphic design for any Main Street-sponsored event at the Historic Ritz Theatre.

The Historic Ritz Theatre's fiscal year begins on July 1 of each year. Its funding is obligated by line item in the City of Toccoa's general fund. Because of this funding method, the Ritz Theatre does not require income to meet expenditure to stay in operation. As an economic anchor of the City of Toccoa, its purpose is to provide appreciation of the arts and cultural enrichment, and to serve as an infrastructure support system in Downtown Toccoa. In Fiscal Year 2020, the Ritz Theatre's general budget was \$91,425, including \$25,000 in programming. This was leveraged with an additional \$6,000 in grant funding and \$6,000 city funding as a grant match, leading to a total of \$37,000 in the programming budget for Fiscal Year 2020. Main Street Toccoa uses acquired grant funding to provide higher quality acts at the Historic Ritz Theatre on a yearly basis.

As an official Main Street Community of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Main Street Toccoa staff participates in yearly training on economic development, business recruitment, arts education, and more. Ritz General Manager Tami Mayhugh yearly attends Georgia Presenters to network with other theatre managers in the State. Additionally, staff attends the Performing Arts Exchange and regular Georgia Main Street seminars and trainings.

## Structural Upkeep & Maintenance

As aforementioned, the Ritz Theatre is funded by line item in the City of Toccoa's annual budget. An overview of the budget as it relates to infrastructure follows:

- **Workers Compensation:** The budget for the Ritz Theatre provides adequate funds in the event that the General Manager of the Ritz Theatre or contract workers are injured in the performance of their duties.
- **Repairs and Maintenance:** Fiscal Year 2020's budget provides \$1,000 in repair and maintenance. Note that these funds may be leveraged with other funds in the budget.
- **Infrastructure Improvements:** In the event that infrastructure improvements are necessary, Fiscal Year 2020's budget provides \$1,000 in this fund.
- **Contract Labor:** Fiscal Year 2020's budget provides \$17,500 in funding for any contractor labor at the Ritz Theatre, including any contracted repair work or infrastructure improvement work.
- **Water/Sewage:** Fiscal Year 2020's budget provides \$1,700 for the maintenance of the Ritz Theatre's plumbing system.
- **Natural Gas:** Fiscal Year 2020's budget provides \$1,000 for the operation of the Ritz Theatre's natural gas appliances.
- **Electricity:** Fiscal Year 2020's budget provides \$7,000 for the operation of the Ritz Theatre's electrical systems, including its marquee.

It must also be mentioned that special purpose infrastructure projects are funded out of a separate grant fund line item in the City of Toccoa's annual budget. 2016's marquee project provided for approximately \$93,000 in separate funding; 2017's sound system provided for approximately \$93,000 in separate funding; 2019's infrastructure improvements provided for approximately \$100,000 in separate funding.

As expected, the budget is adjusted as necessary for each fiscal year, and this typically includes a 3% inflation increase in funding for various line items.

## Readiness

The purpose of this section is to provide readiness and preparation for the sustainability and longevity of the Historic Ritz Theatre. In the event that the Ritz Theatre is damaged through failing infrastructure, criminal intent, other human agency, or act of God, it is the purpose of this document to show the Ritz Theatre's readiness and ability to perform its duties to the citizens of the City of Toccoa. This section will take a "Questions & Answers" approach to account for a plethora of situations.

1. **Does the Historic Ritz Theatre at the Schaefer Center have adequate property insurance, liability insurance, fire insurance, flood insurance, etcetera?**
  - a. The Historic Ritz Theatre is insured at up to \$1,000,000 through the City of Toccoa.
2. **Is there a Ritz Theatre emergency contact list and Crisis Communications plan?**
  - a. The Ritz Theatre has identified the General Manager and the City of Toccoa's Community Development Director as emergency contacts who are authorized to act as emergency community contacts who can address a wide variety of topics in case of a natural or man-made catastrophic event that impacts regular operations of the theatre. Besides communicating with regular theatre constituent groups, these two individuals are also authorized to speak to the media concerning crisis communications announcements.
3. **What will the Ritz Theatre do in the event of an active shooter situation?**
  - a. The local police department is located right next door. The Police Chief has put into place an active shooter plan in the event of an occurrence at the Ritz Theatre. Officers are mere seconds away and will react to the best of their training. Staff is in the process of receiving active shooter training, as well.
4. **How will the Ritz Theatre process routine ticketing functions in the event of a catastrophe?**
  - a. The Ritz Theatre has a long and successful history of processing ticket requests by hand and using only cash or check transactions. Policies and procedures that have been in place for years would take priority in the event that automated online ticket sales and credit card sales become unavailable. Additionally, several shows a year, like the \$1 movies are operated through a cash-only transaction system. Volunteers are also trained to handle cash sales.
5. **Is there a refund policy in the event the Ritz Theatre or the back-up venue becomes unusable?**
  - a. Yes. Manual refunds will be made to any patron who purchases a ticket to an event that is unable to occur due to a natural or man-made disaster. Since we can currently only seat a maximum of 448 guests for any performance, the manual refund process is not as cumbersome as other larger venues might be. Additionally, all ticketing sales online are handled through a third-party system with a robust refund policy. The General Manager of the Ritz Theatre needs only access this online system to automatically process a refund.
6. **What is your Ritz Theatre staff training process for disaster recovery operations planning?**



- a. Currently the Ritz Theatre staff undergoes disaster recovery training as part of the City of Toccoa's existing Hazard Mitigation Plan. Additional Readiness Plan training specifically related to ongoing crucial theatre operations will be conducted and reviewed on a semi-annual basis and updated as conditions warrant.
- 7. In the event that the Ritz Theatre loses the use of its integrated sound system, how will it perform its duties to its patrons?**
  - a. The Historic Ritz Theatre hosts a rotating list of certified sound and light technicians. All certified technicians have their own professional equipment in the event that outside equipment becomes necessary. Primary sound and light technician, Chris Chambers, leaves a cache of his equipment at the Historic Ritz Theatre in the event that it may be necessary. This equipment is easy to set up and provides a high-quality back-up system.
- 8. In the event that the Ritz Theatre has a physically-handicapped individual, how will it perform its duties to this patron?**
  - a. The Historic Ritz Theatre is fully ADA-compliant in its primary egress, in its theatre auditorium, and provides handicapped seating for individuals in need. For the hearing-impaired, 20 assisted listening devices are available free-of-charge for use.
- 9. In the event that the Ritz Theatre loses the use of its plumbing, how will it perform its duties to its patrons?**
  - a. In the event that the plumbing fails, Main Street Toccoa Special Events Coordinator Sharon Crosby has contact information for a local portable toilets company that will provide temporary bathroom facilities for patrons and performers. Additionally, the Ritz Theatre is located next to City Hall and the Toccoa Police Department. Facilities are available for use by the public in the event that they are needed.
- 10. In the event that the Ritz Theatre loses the use of its plumbing, how will it repair necessary infrastructure?**
  - a. The Historic Ritz Theatre budgets yearly funding for infrastructure repairs. If the plumbing becomes inoperative, Main Street staff will immediately work with a certified local plumber and any necessary contractors to make necessary repairs to the infrastructure. The plumbing system is regularly maintained and inspected by a local plumbing company to ensure effective operation.
- 11. In the event that the Ritz Theatre loses the use of its HVAC system, how will it perform its duties to its patrons?**
  - a. While the loss of use of an HVAC system is unfortunate, it is a quality-of-life issue as opposed to a life-safety issue. In the event that the Ritz Theatre loses the use of its HVAC system, it will make all possible efforts to repair the system in expedience but will continue to promote its shows with the disclaimer that the HVAC is inoperable. Large fans can be rented and made accessible for theatre patrons.
- 12. In the event that the Ritz Theatre loses the use of its HVAC system, how will it repair necessary infrastructure?**
  - a. The HVAC system at the Historic Ritz Theatre is less than 10 years old and was installed with funding from the United States Department of Agriculture. It is unlikely it will fail soon. In the event that it does, Main Street staff will immediately work with a certified

local specialist and any necessary contractors to make necessary repairs to the infrastructure.

**13. In the event that the Ritz Theatre is damaged beyond repair, destroyed, or demolished, how will it perform its duties to its patrons?**

- a. Main Street staff will coordinate with the Stephens County Board of Education to make temporary use of the Stephens County High School performing arts center to host all upcoming shows at the High School with no loss in the performance schedule. In the event that the Stephens County Board of Education is unwilling to host the Ritz Theatre, Main Street staff will coordinate with the Georgia Baptist Conference Center to make temporary use of their performing arts space to host all upcoming shows.

**14. In the event that the Ritz Theatre is sued by a patron, organization, or individual, how will it perform its duties to its patrons?**

- a. The Ritz Theatre is owned and operated by the City of Toccoa. In the event that the Ritz Theatre enters into legal action with any entity, the City of Toccoa's attorney shall handle all legal matters while the Ritz Theatre will perform all duties as normal.

**15. What are forthcoming repairs at the Ritz Theatre, and how will these repairs be financed in a manner that will allow the Ritz Theatre to perform its duties to its patrons?**

- a. In January 2020, the General Manger of the Ritz Theatre met with the City of Toccoa's Fire Chief and Assistant Fire Chief for a detailed walk-through of the Ritz Theatre to discuss life safety improvements and hazard mitigation. Upon the conclusion of this walk-through, it was determined that the Ritz Theatre will need to replace several fire doors and make necessary repairs to the existing infrastructure. Additionally, the Ritz Theatre sees its seat tops repaired and replaced on a revolving basis. The contractor for this work will replace these seats in the auditorium with seats from the rear that will be cordoned off. This repair work usually takes no longer than a week. All repairs are financed from the City of Toccoa's general fund.

**16. What concerns does Main Street staff have with infrastructure maintenance at the Historic Ritz Theatre?**

- a. Main Street staff is aware that several issues need to be addressed in the coming years at the Ritz Theatre. These issues include plumbing upgrades and ceiling upgrades, both of which have not seen neglect, but are simply aging infrastructure. Main Street staff is planning for these upgrades, possibly with grant funding. Repair and maintenance is expected in the next several years. In the event that these elements fail before they are requisitioned for repair, the City of Toccoa will use reserve funding to make necessary repairs. As of February 2020, the City of Toccoa has over \$1.8 million in reserve funding.