



The ticket gazebo, now boarded up in front of the entrance to the original Cabrillo College theater in Building 200. Credit: Jana Marcus

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

470 empty seats make some noise: What's next for Cabrillo's original theater?



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Quick Take

Two weeks after Lookout asked whether Cabrillo College's long-shuttered theater could have a second act, nearly 99% of 178 survey respondents said yes. Now a group of longtime Cabrillo artists and educators is exploring what it would take to bring the 470-seat theater back to life, while the college says it welcomes conversations about revitalizing the space.

Apparently, 470 empty seats can make a lot of noise.

When Lookout published the story two weeks ago [about Cabrillo College's long-shuttered theater](#) in Building 200, the question at the heart of it was fairly simple: After sitting dark for 17 years, could the original theater still have a role to play in Santa Cruz County?

Readers had something to say about that.

A lot, as it turns out.

As of last week, 178 people had completed an informal reader survey, with another 20 or so writing directly. Former students, performers, teachers, producers and audience members shared memories of a theater many had assumed was long gone. Others had never been inside the building but recognized something the story brought into focus: Santa Cruz County has precious few affordable, midsize performance spaces available to the community.

The response was remarkably one-sided.

Of the 178 people who completed the survey, 176 favored reopening the theater. That's nearly 99%. Only two said no.

But the numbers told only part of the story. Respondents weren't simply saying, "Open the theater." They had strong opinions about what should happen if it does.

Again and again, they described an affordable community performance space that could accommodate theater, music, dance, lectures, student productions and other cultural events.

Many expressed concern that returning the theater to college management might not solve the problem they see now: performance spaces that can be too expensive or simply unavailable when community organizations need them.

A number suggested some form of outside management or partnership with Cabrillo, including the possibility of an independent organization leasing or operating the theater.

Those are suggestions, not plans. No management model has been proposed or agreed upon, and Cabrillo College has made no commitment to reopen the building.

But the responses weren't simply calling for another theater. They were calling for a particular kind of theater: basic, functional, affordable, and genuinely available to the community.

For Tara Firenzi, the problem is anything but theoretical.

"I've been involved in more than 50 productions in the Santa Cruz community over the past 25 years as a dance teacher and choreographer, and I cannot tell you how incredibly dire the situation is for groups trying to access performance spaces in the county," she said.

Firenzi runs a dance company out of Pacific Collegiate School with more than 130 students, and every year she faces the same question: Where will they perform?

"About 25% of our budget goes to facilities, but we can't really stretch beyond that and stay solvent," she said. "I've looked into the Crocker Theater at Cabrillo in the past, and it would have been closer to 80% of our budget. It's a beautiful space, but we simply can't afford it."

Maggie Collins, who serves on the board of the Tannery World Dance and Cultural Center and chairs the board of Tandy Beal & Company, echoed that need for the right-size venue.

"We cannot make the budget work in a 200-seat theater; you can't sell enough tickets to ever cover your costs with that small a theater," Collins wrote. "Restoring the old theater for community use would be a fabulous thing, and we would love to make use of it."

Musician and entrepreneur Kenny Hill, who remembers both sitting in the audience and performing on the old Cabrillo stage, put the challenge more simply.

"Let's do the right things here, instead of just waiting out the nostalgia," he wrote.

And nostalgia might be the easy part. Enthusiasm doesn't tell anyone what it will cost to turn the lights back on.

The theater has been closed since Cabrillo's [Visual and Performing Arts Complex](#) opened in 2009. Its theatrical lighting and sound systems were removed years ago, HVAC problems have been reported in Building 200, and no recent professional assessment has established what work would be required before an audience could safely return.

Questions remain about accessibility, fire safety requirements, electrical and mechanical systems, the building's condition, and the cost of operating it even if it could be reopened.

Cabrillo has previously told Lookout that no college funding is available to renovate the theater. Asked about the community response to the original article, Cabrillo Marketing Director Regina Ip said the college wants to learn more.

"We appreciate the interest community members have expressed in Building 200 and its future," Ip said in a statement. "We recognize the important role the theater has played for many students, employees, alumni, and local residents over the years."



The back balcony of the original Cabrillo College theater looks out toward the Crocker Theater. Credit: Jana Marcus

Ip also pointed out that Cabrillo continues to support theater and performing arts programming through the Crocker Theater, Samper Recital Hall and the Black Box Theater. But on the question of Building 200 itself, the college left the door open.

"We welcome conversations to explore opportunities to revitalize the space and ensure we serve students and the community," she said.

And that is where the story has begun to move beyond a survey.

Following the public response, four longtime Cabrillo artists and educators interviewed for the original article have begun meeting informally to explore what might be possible.

Wilma Marcus Chandler, Tandy Beal, [Cheryl Anderson](#) and Skip Epperson all have deep ties to Cabrillo and its performing arts history. They are assessing the response, gathering information and considering what questions need to be answered before anyone can seriously talk about reopening the theater.

The group plans to approach [Cabrillo President Jennifer Capps](#) to discuss the possibilities.

They are not launching a fundraising campaign. They have not proposed an operating model. And they aren't claiming the theater can or should reopen before anyone knows its condition or what reopening would cost.

For now, the goal is much simpler: find out what is possible.

"We were excited by the strength of the community's response," the group said in a joint statement. "Now we want to sit down with Cabrillo leadership to learn what it would take to create a realistic path forward."

There are still considerably more questions than answers.

What would it cost simply to make the theater safe and functional again, as opposed to completely modernizing it? What work would current codes require? Who could operate it? Who would pay for the work? Would Cabrillo consider a partnership with an outside organization? And could the theater remain affordable enough for the very community groups now saying they need it?

Those questions will determine whether the enthusiasm generated by the first story becomes something more.

But one question no longer seems particularly difficult.

Does anybody still care about an old theater that has been sitting dark in the middle of Cabrillo College for 17 years?

After 178 survey responses, roughly 20 letters and an exploratory group beginning to organize, the answer appears to be yes.

The harder question is what happens next.