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## NEWS

# Project 'revitalizes' Fort Pierce's old Lincoln Theatre



Artist rendering of the renovation of the Lincoln Theater in Fort Pierce.

By Larry Bailey

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With cleaning of the exterior of the old Lincoln Theatre downtown complete, architects REG, Inc. of West Palm Beach are turning their plans toward restoring the 60-year-old building.

The firm, retained by the Martin Luther King Jr. Commemorative Committee, is moving into the design stage.

"This project revitalizes a neglected historic structure and when we finish, it will anchor the neighborhood and ignite new development," said lead architect Rick Gonzalez.

The Fort Pierce Redevelopment Agency granted the committee \$350,000 for the work, agency Director Jon Ward said.

"In the same manner that I looked forward to Dionne Warwick opening the Sunrise, I hold the same excitement and anticipation for the opening night celebrations at the Lincoln Theatre, adding it to the ranks of cultural assets in our city," said Ward.

The Lincoln Theatre, built in 1948 by local residents Dr. Clem C. Benton and Dr. Harry Center, is one of the few remaining original African-American movie houses.

Attorney Margaret Benton, daughter of original builder and chairperson of restoration for the Commemorative Committee, said the theater is a source of pride for many in the community.

"The Committee has been vigilant in saving the property from demolition and preserving it," she said. "The theater's live shows and double features are a source of fond memories for many growing up on Avenue D back in the day. There was even a pharmacy in the same building with a window we used to pass out popcorn."

Ward believes it is a cultural asset that can translate into financial benefits through tourism not unlike the benefits that cities like Memphis derived when restoring Beale Street.

Regardless of recent progress, the historic restoration project has had its share of funding obstacles.

"Over the past two years the Lincoln Theatre has applied for a special category grant from Florida's Department of Community Affairs Historic Preservation Office, but the grant program has not been funded," said Ward. Additional grants are being sought.

Gonzalez said the hope is to start construction on the theater by next year. The plan is for it to be a multi-purpose center designed to accommodate live performances, movie and video events, professional broadcasts, and serve as a community center for special gatherings.