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## Tower Theater remains an asset for Little Havana

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The Tower Theater is now operated by Miami Dade College, a relationship that's expected to continue.

More than 20 years ago, when the city of Miami bought an historic but abandoned theater on Southwest Eighth Street, city leaders expressed their hope that the investment would help revitalize Little Havana.

The troubled neighborhood that's considered the symbolic heart of Miami's Cuban exile community couldn't afford to wait to see if "something will fall from the sky and drop in the middle of Eight Street," then Commissioner Miriam Alonso implored during a 1991 meeting. "The time for that area is now".

After spending some \$3 million to purchase and restore the Tower Theater, the city in 2002 handed the management duties to Miami-Dade Community College (now Miami Dade College), which committed to showing films and cultural events at affordable prices.

Today, many consider the Tower Theater the beacon on Southwest Eight Street that attracts lovers of international film, including many Cuban immigrants who once lived in the neighborhood but now own homes in the suburbs and tourists who are unfamiliar with Miami's cubaneo.

"The relationship with Miami Dade College has been one of this neighborhood's success stories," said Pablo Cantón, who retired this summer from his longtime post as administrator of the city's Neighborhood Enhancement Team in Little Havana. "The theater has helped local businesses because when people come to see movies they also go across the street to buy dinner. And you have people who haven't set foot in Little Havana in years who are now returning to watch a movie."

Nearly 50,000 people attended films at the theater last year, said MDC spokesman Alejandro Ríos. It is also a principle venue for MDC's Miami International Film Festival and has been the site of several major educational events, including the world premier of the documentary Oscar's Cuba, about the famed Cuban dissident Oscar Elias Biscet.

"It can certainly be argued that the Tower Theater has been at the core of the Calle Ocho's cultural renaissance," he said. "It has brought new audiences into the city and the college.

It has been visited by major actors, governmental leaders and thinkers with international acclaim.”

But the past decade of use has started to wear on the theater, built in 1926. This summer, city officials discovered that the roof had some water damage. Meanwhile, MDC President Eduardo Padrón presented a list of possible improvements to the theater, from replacing its four heating and air conditioning units to rebuilding the stage area to attract better live acts.

Currently, the college manages the theater on what’s essentially a month-to-month contract. The original five-year contract, which was renewed in 2007, expired in May. Padrón was out of the country last week and could not be reached for comment. Ríos did not respond directly to questions about the contract but said that the infrastructure improvements could cost some \$700,000.

The city can’t afford to pay for repairs out of its general fund, so earlier this year, officials considered deeding the property to MDC with the understanding that the college would then finance the capital improvements.

“We considered that option with the clause that if they stopped maintaining the building or using it as a theater, the property would revert to the city,” said Henry Torre, director of public facilities. “The intent was to keep it open as a community center that services the residents of Little Havana.”

City administrators never brought the plan before the commission after learning that district commissioner, Frank Carollo, was opposed. “This has nothing to do with the college, which has a great reputation in this community,” he said. “It has to do with the fact that the city has given away so many other properties to other municipalities or government agencies, and I don’t think it’s necessary in this case.”

Instead, Carollo has proposed using a portion of federal Community Block Development Grantfunds designated for his district to pay for the capital improvements. A plan to pass the funds to the college will be presented at the commission’s first meeting in January, said George Mensah, director of the city’s Community and Economic Development Department. As the owner, the city must agree to all the work performed, Mensah assured.

Bill Fuller, a Little Havana developer, said it makes sense that the city hold on to the property. “The folks at Miami Dade College have been great stewards of the theater, but it’s a city asset, not a college asset,” said Fuller, who owns several properties along Southwest Eighth Street. “The Tower Theater is the centerpiece of the entire neighborhood and any community would be blessed to be able to preserve its local theater.”