

The Eltrym Theater in Baker City celebrated its 80th birthday on June 27, 2020. While late June is typically bustling, on that sunny day the theater was closed to the public due to COVID-19. A small group of my former employees joined me for a movie and cupcakes, and that was all the celebration that this bastion of our community experienced.

The Eltrym was the creation of a theater owner, Myrtle Buckmiller, who got her start in the theater industry in 1915, when she began operating her first theater in Moscow, Idaho. She moved to Seattle in 1916 and for the next couple of years, bought several theaters and grew her business and expertise. She chose only to invest in small neighborhood theaters, with the belief that these theaters are essential venues for vibrant communities. She left the fast pace of Seattle for Baker City, where she purchased all of Baker's theaters and operated them until her death, just before the Eltrym opened in 1940.

When Myrtle's newest theater opened here in Baker City in 1940, her good friend Mark Cory gave a speech and declared that, "the structure is a monument not only to the community but to a woman, Mrs. Myrtle Buckmiller, who always wanted a new showhouse for the city."

I've long wondered what it must have been like for her to pull her theaters through the Spanish Flu of 1918 and then to thrive, as she did, afterward. I look up to Myrtle as a businesswoman, and her survival through 1918 has always seemed remarkable to me. I did not think I would ever have a comparable experience.

But here we are. Our experience has been markedly worse than Myrtle's. Historic newspapers from 1918 indicate that theaters were shut down for only a short time. Even still, theaters being shut down is what many people think of when they think of the Spanish Flu.

Our business was shut down for a year. We were able to open for two months last fall, but we just barely broke even. Movie Theaters, unlike a lot of businesses, have really had no viable option to adapt to the pandemic and continue operating. The language of the state's restrictions required our closure, and the film studios stopped releasing marketable films. With key markets in New York and California closed, film studios will not put out "good" product until they know they'll be able to put "butts in seats" (that's an industry term), and we're not going to be putting butts in seats as long as our capacity is limited and consumers feel unsafe due to the spread of COVID-19.

Although we are open now, and people are returning to the theater, we are unable to put as many butts in seats as we need to remain profitable and tend to the gaping debt wound we suffered this past year. We know that consumer confidence will return and that our capacity restrictions will lift, and that one day we will again be selling out our theaters for Marvel flicks, but it's not going to be immediate.

We are determined to survive this pandemic. We are determined to continue the work of Myrtle Buckmiller, and keep this showhouse running for the benefit of our community. In order to do so, we have taken out loans and received a handful of grants. We have refinanced some of our accounts. We sold our farm and moved into the city. We've done our level best to accommodate our circumstances.

It has been a year, though, and we are now beginning to make payments on those loans. In effect, we've taken out loans to pay loans. All the while, we've been doing our best to adapt to provide a safe environment for our guests by investing in air scrubbers for our HVAC and devoting more staff time to cleaning.

We need help.

Please understand the important role that movie theaters play in keeping communities livable, vibrant and connected.

Please support HB 3376.

Sincerely,

Teresa Zimmer-McQuisten
Eltrym Theater, LLC.
Baker City