

## HUNTINGTON VILLAGE

### Businesses Mourn IMAC's Closing

Local restaurateurs, shop owners fear economic impact of losing theater-going crowd

By Sara-Megan Walsh/swalsh@longislandernews.com

Local business owners and restaurateurs are expressing shock and concern about how IMAC theater's closure will affect business, many fearing the worst.

"It's a tragic sign of the times when a local icon like IMAC is forced to close," said Bob Bontempi, chairman of the Huntington Town Chamber of Commerce. "IMAC was a huge draw for almost 30 years and had a tremendous outflow of business to local retail centers, especially restaurants."

Restaurant owners were surprised when Executive Director Michael Rothbard announced his decision to close the theater's doors last week after 26 years in business. They now face an uncertain future given the loss of pedestrian foot traffic the theater's music and cultural events brought.

"It's a sad day for Huntington. I think the local government really dropped the ball on this one" said Michael Meehan, co-owner of Meehan's of Huntington located across from IMAC Theater. "People say Huntington is the cultural center of Long Island because of Cinema Arts Center, Heckscher Park, and lots of art galleries – but this was the biggest draw of them all and now it's gone."

Rothbard said the cost of maintaining the century-old building against reduced funding and changes in Long Island's art scene convinced him to close.

Meehan said he believed the Town should have done more to help IMAC overcome its financial obstacles. The restaurant owner estimated that IMAC drew approximately 2,000 people to town on weekends, bringing 30,000 people a year to patronize local businesses.

"It brought people to town and once they were here they ate at the restaurants, bars – it brought people here and kept them here," said Marc Salese, owner of Almarco and Junior's Pizza in Huntington village. "We need another draw to the area."

Salese said he had a lot business from IMAC's patrons over the years, being one who advertised in a pamphlet featuring local restaurants where theater-goers could grab a bite.

"It's one more blow," Larry Goodman, owner of Huntington Village Tavern, said. "It's hard to put a quantitative number on it, but it's going to hurt local businesses and ripple

through the community.”

Bontempi said it was too early to guess the impact IMAC’s closing would have.

“I think any time a business that goes out that’s an anchor like the [IMAC] was, it’s going to have an impact on the surrounding businesses,” said Marry Alice Meinserman, president of the Huntington Station Business Improvement District.

Some believe that the Town’s summer events may temporarily buffer local businesses from the impact, but that village business will face a dire times come fall.

Supervisor Frank Petrone is in the process of assembling a task force to address the loss of the IMAC theater on local business and the possibility of bringing in a new world-class venue. Those interested in getting involved can contact Director of Cultural Affairs John Coraor at 631-351-3099 or [jcoraor@town.huntington.ny.us](mailto:jcoraor@town.huntington.ny.us).

A large red and white “for rent” sign already hangs from the doors of IMAC’s former lobby. Meinserman said she believes it will take a long time to rent out the space due to its size and design as a theater, in addition to its rent. The future of the century-old theater remains uncertain with its multitude of structural problems, and local business owners spoke warily of the abandoned building turning into another empty storefront marring the downtown.

“There’s this tremendous sense of urgency,” said Bontempi. “We’re going to do whatever we can to get everyone moving together and we’ll find some common ground to hopefully get a quick resolution to this challenge.”