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Executive Director Abby Pete

sheasdowntown@gmail.com; (440) 812-4313

Shea's Downtown Unveils Three-Year Plan to Bring Ashtabula's Beloved Historic Theater Roaring Back to Life

DOWNTOWN ASHTABULA — The Main Avenue Performing Arts and Community Center, the 501(c)(3) nonprofit behind Shea's Downtown, today announced an ambitious three-year, three-phase plan to bring the historic Shea's Theater back to life as a true hub for the community. Piece by piece, the community landmark will first reopen as a Café, Community Incubator Kitchen, Co-Work, and Office Space as the team works to build a stunning new event space ahead of the day the entire theater once again welcomes Ashtabula in.

"Construction is happening in three phases, with the goal of giving a piece of Shea's back to the community each year as we work to bring the entire theater space back to life," John Ellis, Board Chair said.

Phase One: Café, Community Incubator Kitchen, Co-Work, and Office Spaces at Shea's

Phase One is tentatively set for completion by winter 2026 and will bring the Grand Hallway back into public use as a café showcasing local food, with a community incubator kitchen in partnership with NEO Fund that will initially focus on food truck-based programming. The café will be led by Head Chef John Krause of Mary's Kitchen (Geneva-on-the-Lake) and Mary's Urban Food Truck, and the team is thrilled to welcome Head Baker Stacy Stevenson of Bakery on Main. Chef Krause will work closely with NEO Fund to develop programming for the incubator kitchen, which will include classes offered through NEO Fund as well as evening events. The café will tentatively operate from 7am to 4pm, after which the space will transition to programming and private events. The Shea's Team is grateful to NEO Fund's Executive Director, Kelly Sposito, for being an incredible strategic partner as this first phase was conceptualized. Upstairs, 5 of the 16 office spaces will open as the **Co-Work at Shea's**, offering the community fully equipped hourly, weekly, and monthly office room rentals.

Phase Two: Entering the Theater

Phase Two is currently underway and includes accessibility to the building and demolition in the theater. The theater sat untouched for more than 50 years, and decades of accumulated materials left behind by previous owners had to be cleared before the space could safely begin construction and eventually reopen to the public. With the demolition phase now underway thanks to a generous grant from The Robert S. Morrison Foundation, Shea's Downtown will bring a brand-new event center to the community by 2027, seating between 200 and 250 guests, in the back half of the theater.

Phase Three: Completion of the Theater

Phase Three will conclude with the inevitable renovation and return of the Shea's Theater in 2028, welcoming a range of local and touring live performances, movies, graduations, weddings, and more, just as the original theater used to function. Recognizing the historical impact of the theater to the community, the renovation will be focused on maintaining the original character of the space with Streamline Moderne time period inspired designs and decor. Following the completion of Phase Three, Shea's aims to employ upwards of 100 individuals throughout the space.

"Job creation and career development remain a central focus of the project, designed from the outset to serve as a catalyst destination in the broader effort to revitalize downtown Ashtabula," said Executive Director Abby Pete. "The

total project cost is estimated to land around \$5,000,000, and we couldn't do it without the generous support of our partners."

Funding

Shea's Downtown is a true culmination of community and statewide support:

- **A \$500,000 Ohio State Capital Bill grant** provided the initial funding to begin construction.
- **A \$350,000 in-kind donation was given by John Ellis, Board Chair** to bring phase one construction to completion
- **The Ashtabula County Board of Developmental Disabilities** supported Phase One with the first local grant, a **\$20,000** accessibility award that funded a wheelchair lift and a full-size changing table in the restroom
- **Park Place Nonprofit** came in to help close out Phase One with a **\$250,000** grant to build out both kitchens
- **The Robert S. Morrison Foundation** is now helping kick off Phase Two with a **\$100,000** demolition grant.
- **The Ashtabula Foundation awarded a \$20,000 grant** to help bring the alley back to life as an extension of the Café

Shea's Downtown is the product of an entire community coming together to bring back a historic gem. Long before it became Shea's Downtown, the building was simply Shea's — one of Ashtabula's grandest movie theaters. Opened in 1949 in the striking Streamline Moderne style, Shea's seated more than 1,700 guests and was, for decades, the place to be on Main Avenue. Popcorn and glass Coca-Cola bottles were staples of the Shea's experience, and moviegoers packed the house for everything from Hollywood premieres to hometown gatherings. The theater eventually closed in the early 1980s and sat quiet for more than 50 years. As part of the renovation, the project team was thrilled to recover the theater's original popcorn machine — a small but meaningful piece of Shea's history that will have a place in the building's next chapter.

Shea's Downtown is deeply grateful to the following individuals and organizations, whose support has helped move this project forward: the City of Ashtabula, including Jim Timonere and Mary Church; the Ashtabula County Commissioners JP Ducro, Kathryn Whittington, and Casey Kozlowski; Kelly Sposito, NEO Fund; Tim and Alice McCarthy, Park Place Nonprofit; Alec Raffa, Robert S. Morrison Foundation; Manda Jackson, Ashtabula County Board of Developmental Disabilities; JT Kanicki, Ashtabula Foundation; Steve Cray and Mike Cray of Harbor Park; Tim Watts, local piano expert; Christine Seuffert, local community leader; Rick and Linda Coblitz; Michael Hurwitz, theater renovation expert; Great Wave Communications; Michael Thompson, President of the Ashtabula Downtown Development Association; Jane and Chris DiGiacomo, Framed On Main; Toni Carlisle of Carlisle's Home in the Harbor; Gallo of Harbor Gardens; local construction partners have also been essential to the project, including Castle Railings and Metcalf Glass.

Shea's Downtown grew out of years of research led by Abby Pete into how to catalyze redevelopment along Main Avenue. In 2023, Cleveland-based developer John Ellis — owner of Pinnacle Construction, a lifelong Northeast Ohio resident, and father, husband, and baseball coach — acquired the property, identifying Ashtabula as a key area for growth. His team completed the construction of Phase One in just eight months.

Pete pitched her concept to Ellis, and their partnership began with JSB Creative Agency helping tell the story of the historic theater's reimaging. That collaboration grew into a shared broader vision for the project, leading to Pete's appointment as Executive Director of Shea's Downtown, with Ellis now chairing the board alongside members Kelly Sposito (former owner of the Harbor Perk), Frank Camardo, and Jeff Haas.

Pete co-founded JSB Creative Agency with business partner Holly Bland, who is also deeply invested in the Shea's Downtown project. The JSB team helping elevate Shea's Downtown also includes Communications Director, Corinne Schoren, and Emily Schier, who are proud to focus their work on marketing Ashtabula County.

The team is thankful to everyone who has supported the project, and to the community that has followed along every step of the way. Anyone with memories of the theater they'd like to share is encouraged to reach out via social media or email sheasdowntown@gmail.com. Be sure to follow Shea's Downtown on social media, and sign up for the newsletter to be the first to receive project updates (more coming very soon!) ###