

# Coming Soon: Hartford's Front Street Movie Theater Headed To Early November Opening

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It's nearly showtime at the 4-screen movie theater now under construction at downtown Hartford's Front Street entertainment district.

Spotlight Theaters, Inc. of Atlanta, which is planning an opening by early November, is making a \$4 million bet that the combination of movies, restaurant and bar will provide all the ingredients for a complete evening out. It also believes its offering of independent, art and mainstream films will be enough to draw not only patrons who live downtown but those from the surrounding suburban area.

General Manager Steve Menschell provided a tour of the venue to The Courant this week, showing off the restaurant, bar and each of the four auditoriums, with sizes ranging from 85 seats to

250 seats, for a total of nearly 700.

The opening has been long in the making. Spotlight is the second operator to take over the project since it was first announced in late 2010 that a movie theater would be coming to Front Street. Spotlight has had to push back its opening several times, but Menschell says the venue is now nearly ready.

It will be worth the wait, Menschell says.

"From what people are used to, they just won't believe it's a movie theater," Menschell said.

A lot is riding on the theater, the first in Downtown Hartford since the early 1970s. Spotlight also is the first tenant for the long-empty, publicly-subsidized Front Street, the last component of the Adriaen's Landing development, which included construction of the city's convention center. The theater will occupy about a third of the 60,000-square-foot development.

"The first tenant, particularly in retail, you want to be successful," Oz Griebel, president and chief executive

of the [MetroHartford Alliance](#), a business advocacy group. "You want to be able to point to it as being a success."

Front Street was originally intended to work with the convention center to provide an amenity for convention-goers.

"Without Front Street being completed there is a desolate feeling coming over Columbus Boulevard," Griebel said.

A half-dozen major movie theaters once populated downtown Hartford, with two — the Allyn and Loew's — located on Asylum Street where the Hartford 21 complex now stands. The Strand, on Main Street, was the last to go in 1974.

Spotlight's plan is for a hybrid theater with a full-service restaurant and bar where patrons can sit down to lunch or dinner, even if they aren't staying for a movie. Menschell said an executive chef has been hired for the 85-seat restaurant. The dinner menu will be a cut above family casual dining with entrees generally priced below \$20. A draft beer at the

20-seat bar will cost you about \$4.

For those attending a movie, food and drink – including alcohol – can be carried into the theater. Airline-style trays will be available in the auditoriums.

This week, workers were preparing each of the auditoriums for installation of the stadium seating. The seats were chosen in a poll conducted last summer in Hartford, and are expected to be bolted in place the first week of October.

No attempts are being made to hide the digital technology that will be used in theater. Racks of servers that digitally receive films beamed into the theater will be visible in a glassed-in room that patrons will pass on their way to the two larger auditoriums.

Spotlight also hopes to attract corporate meetings, where conferencing is beamed in for large groups.

But will the movie-going public pay for parking in the garage attached to the theater when they can park for free elsewhere?

Parking fees are still being determined, but Menschell said he expects them to be nominal, under \$5. The theater also expects to validate, which could cut the cost even further, Menschell said.

Menschell said the theater will seek to carve out a niche in the independent and art

movie market. Spotlight is convinced there aren't enough screens in the Hartford area showing these film genres.

One major competitor will be Cinema City at the Palace, five screens at the larger Palace 17 on New Park Avenue in Hartford. Ticket prices are comparable, \$11 for adults and a discount for seniors, children and matinees.

Joe Masher, chief operating officer at Bow Tie Cinemas, which operates the Palace, said the Cinema City screens are doing "very well" since the operations of Cinema City — formerly in Hartford's South Meadows — were combined with the Palace two years ago. Cinema City showed a mix of independent, foreign and art films.

While Masher wished Spotlight well, he said, "Cinema City is and will continue to be the premier destination."

Offering independent, foreign and art films can be unpredictable because the size of audiences can vary widely, said James Hanley, co-president of CineStudio, an art film house in Hartford.

This weekend, Hanley expects the Woody Allen comedy "To Rome With Love" to do well. But he doesn't know about next week's "Farewell, My Queen," the French drama about Marie Antoinette that

had a wide commercial release.

"It's a small audience that will come to see some of these films," Hanley said. "When a theater opens, it finds its niche. If the audiences are there for the art house movies, they'll show some more. If they aren't, they will show more mainstream."

Hanley said the fact that downtown doesn't have a theater and it's near the convention center could be a plus, as is the opportunity to eat dinner while watching a movie.

Nevertheless, to be a success, Spotlight will have to draw from beyond the city and from the surrounding suburbs.

Masher said Cinema City draws from as far north as Springfield and even beyond, from North Hampton, Mass. where an art film house recently closed.

Spotlight is working on promotions with local hotels and the convention center. And it will be very active on Facebook looking for suggestions on what the theater will show.

"We want the community to think of it as their theater," Menschell said. "A lot of the choices are going to be consumer-driven, what they want to see."

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