

Ellis group plots encore for D.C.'s Howard Theatre

Washington Business Journal - September 8, 2006 by [Sean Madigan](#) Senior Staff Reporter

Chip Ellis remembers hearing his father's stories about how Lionel Hampton used to whip the crowd at Howard Theatre into such a frenzy people would jump from the balconies onto the stage.

But nobody has played the Howard like that in years. In fact, nobody's played the Howard at all since it closed several years after riots tore through Shaw in 1968.

Over the years, plans have come and gone. But nothing stuck and the Howard is still a crumbling ward of the D.C. government.

Late last month, city officials tapped Ellis and his partners to restore the 96-year-old theater at Seventh and T streets NW to its former glory. Ellis Development Group is planning a \$100 million headquarters for Radio One on the same block.

The city has spent years trying to figure out how to return the theater back to productive use. It flirted with Jonathan Taylor of Kumase Development for years, but the developer and the city couldn't pull together a workable plan. D.C. officials, at the prodding of D.C. Councilman Jim Graham, D-Ward 1, issued a formal request for proposals to restore the property this spring. The solicitation generated little interest, besides submissions by Kumase and Ellis. The city picked Ellis.

"I think that's a very good choice," Graham says.

Ellis has ideas for what he and his partners would like to do with the Howard -- including losing "Theatre" from the formal name. He's partnering with Harry Schnipper, who owns D.C.'s venerable Blues Alley, which will potentially become the theater's operator. Ellis also enlisted Georgetown restaurateur Paul Cohn as a consultant.

Ellis also wants to create an educational component to teach children and tourists about Washington's jazz history.

"What we are trying to create is a destination," he says.

D.C. officials already have set aside about \$21 million for structural repairs to stabilize and restore the building. Ellis estimates the project will cost about \$17 million, a figure he hopes can be reduced by employing historic preservation and urban redevelopment tax credits.

Next door, Ellis and his partners, Four Points, the Jarvis Cos. and the National Capital Revitalization Corp. are pushing ahead with their Radio One project. He says they expect to submit their zoning filing by the end of the month or early October, which, if approved, would allow them to break ground by the same time next year.

The project, Broadcast Center One, will not only include 100,000 square feet of office space for the Lanham-based broadcaster, but also 200,000 square feet of condos and 23,000 square feet of retail space.

Ellis says he hopes to figure out a way to incorporate developer Douglas Jemal's former Twinkie factory, which shares the block with the theater, a Green Line Metrorail station entrance and the Broadcast One project.



Joanne S. Lawton
Center stage: Ellis
Development Group COO
Malik Ellis, left, and CEO Chip
Ellis plan to bring the Howard
Theatre in D.C. back to life at
the request of the city.
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