

# FORUM THEATER FAQ

## 1. Why did Metuchen buy the Forum Theater?

The Borough of Metuchen acquired the Forum Theatre in July 2019 to preserve its historical and cultural significance and ensure its future as a cornerstone of the community. Time had not been kind to the Forum, and swift action was necessary to prevent the possibility of losing it forever. Middlesex County provided a \$3.5 million grant to cover the purchase price, allowing the Borough to take ownership and begin the real work of determining how to revitalize the theater in an economically viable way.

Owning the Forum gave the Borough control over its redevelopment, protecting it from being repurposed for something that might not align with Metuchen's vision. This acquisition is a key part of the broader plan to create the Metuchen Arts District, enhancing the town's cultural vibrancy and quality of life for residents while ensuring the Forum Theatre remains a vital part of our community for generations to come.

## 2. What is the Metuchen Arts District?

The Metuchen Arts District is a vision to transform the area surrounding the Forum Theatre into a vibrant hub for arts, culture, and community activities. At the heart of this vision is the transformed Forum Theatre, which is expected to inspire creative spaces for performances, arts education, and community events. The goal is to position Metuchen as a regional cultural destination, enhance community engagement, and contribute to the town's cultural and economic vibrancy while preserving its unique character.

The concept is guided by a redevelopment plan adopted in June 2023. This plan is designed to transform the underutilized space surrounding the Forum Theatre by focusing on sustainable development, historic preservation, and improved infrastructure while maintaining Metuchen's charm and integrating community input.

The Metuchen Arts District reflects our community's commitment to enriching residents' lives, fostering creativity, and supporting the growth of our local economy.

## 3. What is the condition of the existing theater?

The Forum Theatre is currently in a state of significant disrepair and structural decline. It has been largely inactive for over a decade, with issues such as outdated and unsafe building access, obsolete parking lot design, and deteriorating structural conditions. These factors have created safety hazards and contributed to the building's classification as substandard under redevelopment criteria.

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## 4. How many seats does the existing Forum Theatre structure hold?

The current theater holds approximately 450 seats.

## 5. If we restore the theater exactly as is, how many seats would it hold?

If we were to restore the Theatre exactly as it is, we would lose more than half of its capacity due to modern building codes and accessibility requirements, going from approximately 450 seats for its traditional configuration to just 200 seats, give or take. Additionally, the venue would be limited in the types of events that it can host, which would otherwise reduce its economic viability.

## 6. Why is it important to have a vibrant theater in Metuchen?

The Forum Theatre is more than just a building—it's a community landmark that embodies Metuchen's unique character and enhances its identity as a vibrant cultural destination right in the middle of our thriving downtown. It has the potential to serve as a community gathering space for residents of all ages, hosting performances, educational programs, and events that foster a sense of belonging and enrich our community's quality of life.

Economically, a theater attracts visitors, increases foot traffic, and supports local businesses, including restaurants, shops, and services in the downtown area. Through the Borough's strategic planning process, it became clear that residents and the broader community have a strong interest in arts programming, reaffirming the importance of a theater in fulfilling these cultural needs.

While nearby communities may have theater venues, Metuchen has a unique opportunity to create a flexible "boutique arts center" designed for intimate, community-focused programming. This theater would build on the Borough's rich history of supporting the arts while complementing, rather than competing with, those other venues.

## 7. What is going to happen with the Forum Theatre?

The Borough acquired the Forum Theatre in July 2019 with the commitment to preserving its legacy as a theater for our community. Even before its purchase, we realized that the building's condition had deteriorated to the point of being deemed unsafe for use. Since then, we have worked closely with theater consultants, architects,

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and other professionals to carefully evaluate the structure and develop a plan that respects the Forum's history while meeting today's needs.

After thorough consideration, we have determined that the most viable path forward is to reimagine the Forum as a flexible, multi-use space. This transformed venue will accommodate a variety of events—from concerts, dance performances, and comedy shows to standing-room gatherings, conventions, and banquets—ensuring the Forum's economic viability and relevance for future generations. Throughout this process, we are committed to honoring the Forum's history and its importance to our community.

## **8. Would the current configuration at Forum Theater allow for flexible use?**

The current traditional configuration limits the variety of performances and uses for the Forum Theatre. A flexible space allows for reconfigurable seating and staging arrangements, making it suitable for theater productions, concerts, film screenings, community meetings, educational workshops, and more. This versatility enables the theater to serve a broader audience and host events that would not fit the rigid format of traditional fixed seating. As trends in performing arts and event programming evolve, a flexible space ensures long-term relevance by adapting to new demands, such as blended events that combine live performances with streaming components. Additionally, non-traditional flexible spaces foster inclusivity by being accessible to local arts organizations, schools, families, and community groups with varying needs while maximizing revenue potential through diverse programming.

## **9. What would we like to see in the Forum Theater?**

The Forum Theatre will offer a seamless blend of historic character and modern functionality, designed to serve as both a cultural anchor and a community landmark. The main performance space will feature a 338-seat flexible auditorium that is retractable and allows for multiple configurations to accommodate many types of events. It will also include modern amenities, a spacious lobby with a café, and more. The integrated audiovisual systems and lighting will support professional-grade performances. Sustainable design features, like energy-efficient lighting and eco-friendly materials, will be incorporated into the project. The original architectural charm of the Forum Theatre will be preserved, maintaining its iconic presence on Main Street and ultimately integrating with a future Metuchen Arts District that features improved pedestrian pathways, outdoor seating areas, and public art installations.

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## 10. How are we going to pay for this?

The Borough applied for and received a \$3.5M grant from Middlesex County in 2018. This money was initially used to purchase the Theatre in 2019 and continues to be used to support the costs of strategic planning and legal fees associated with the redevelopment of the Arts District. In 2023, the Borough received another \$3 million as a budget allocation from the State. Also, in 2023, the Borough helped draft a bill establishing a cultural arts tax incentive program, which became law, that amended a NJ Economic Development Authority (EDA) program that will allow the Borough to access tax credit proceeds that, if approved, would pay for most of the project. Any remaining proceeds for the project would have to be supported through a public-private partnership at the Halsey Street Parking Lot site.

## 11. What is DEVCO and how will it help us with this project?

The Borough has designated DEVCO as the official redeveloper for this vital project, formalizing a partnership to help bring the vision of the Metuchen Arts District to life. DEVCO is a private, non-profit corporation originally established to revitalize New Brunswick. It has played a key role in transformative projects across New Jersey and Middlesex County. Their impressive track record includes over \$3 billion in public-private partnership initiatives, such as the New Brunswick Performing Arts Center, the New Brunswick Cultural District, and the Rutgers Cancer Institute.

For the Forum Theatre project, DEVCO will create a concept for the Borough's consideration that aims to fully fund the theater's construction while developing a sustainable revenue stream for its ongoing operation. They plan to leverage funding opportunities through New Jersey's cultural arts tax incentive program and explore improvements to the Halsey Street Parking Lot property, aligning with the vision outlined in the 2023 Arts District Redevelopment Plan.

## 12. How much will all of this cost taxpayers?

The Forum Theatre project is expected to be constructed at no additional cost to Borough taxpayers. From the beginning, we've been committed to ensuring this project moves forward without placing significant financial burdens or unnecessary debt on our residents. By leveraging the new cultural arts tax incentive program, multiple grants from the State and Middlesex County, and potential redevelopment of the Halsey Street parking lot, we can ensure the Forum is revitalized while minimizing any use of municipal funding.

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## **13. What are the options for improving the Halsey Street Parking Lot to help fund and sustain the Forum Theater?**

Since the Halsey Street Parking Lot opened decades ago, it has served as the primary parking area for the Forum Theatre. To best support the theater and its associated redevelopment while continuing to meet the needs of commuter parkers and the broader community, we anticipate that improvements to the lot will be necessary.

One potential option is constructing a multi-purpose parking structure that accommodates Forum Theatre patrons, resident commuters, and additional uses tied to the Arts District redevelopment. Beyond serving as a parking solution, this site presents an opportunity to incorporate supportive and sustainable funding sources for the Forum Theatre. These could include concepts that align with the goals of the Arts District Redevelopment Plan, such as complimentary mixed-use components and other innovative revenue-generating elements designed to sustain the Forum's operations long-term.

## **14. What would be the impact of a parking garage at the Halsey Street parking lot to this section of our downtown?**

The construction of a new parking garage at the Halsey Street parking lot offers an opportunity for the Borough to improve traffic flow in and around this part of downtown. We are committed to addressing potential bottlenecks and enhancing access to ensure the garage operates efficiently for commuters.

By incorporating thoughtful design and considering input from residents, the new parking garage can streamline parking and pedestrian movement, making it easier and quicker for commuters to access the train station. Our focus is on improving the overall functionality of the Halsey Street parking area to benefit both commuters and the neighborhood generally.

## **15. What is happening with the gas station?**

The Borough has initiated legal action to acquire the former gas station property adjacent to the Forum Theatre at Main Street and Amboy Avenue. This site is vital to our vision for the Metuchen Arts District. Abandoned since 2016, the property has fallen into disrepair and suffers from contamination, making its revitalization essential. Despite years of good-faith efforts by the Borough, unreasonable delays and demands by the property owner left the Borough with no choice but to file condemnation proceedings on January 24, 2025. This process ensures the owner receives fair market value while

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remaining responsible for cleanup costs. The acquisition will be funded with proceeds from the original 2018 Middlesex County arts grant.

## **16. Why did it take so long to get to this point?**

We made it clear from the beginning that bringing the Forum back to life would take time. Complex redevelopment projects like this require vision, innovation, collaboration, methodical planning, patience, and extraordinary intergovernmental partnerships. Over the past five and a half years, we have navigated legal, logistical, and strategic challenges, including the pandemic and determining how to honor the Forum's history while meeting modern functionality and economic needs.

Our priority has always been to approach this project thoughtfully—aligning it with our broader vision for the Metuchen Arts District while ensuring we do not burden taxpayers with unnecessary costs or debt. We have taken a deliberate approach, securing external funding wherever possible and avoiding shortcuts that could compromise the project's success.

Despite the challenges, we remain focused on delivering a renewed Forum that will serve our community for generations to come.

## **17. What is the Borough's plan to account for resident concerns related to issues like noise, light pollution, and traffic associated with increased activity from a revitalized Forum Theatre and redevelopment in the Metuchen Arts District?**

The Borough is working closely with DEVCO and its architectural professionals to ensure that the revitalization of the Forum Theatre and the development of the Metuchen Arts District are planned thoughtfully to minimize potential impacts on residents. Our goal is to enhance community spaces and improve the overall quality of life, not create burdens.

The redevelopment plan includes measures to address key concerns such as noise, light pollution, and traffic. The goal is to create a more pedestrian-friendly environment by enhancing streetscapes, improving parking access, and integrating public spaces. These improvements are designed to facilitate smoother traffic flow and reduce bottlenecks during peak times for residents near the Forum. Additionally, noise and lighting standards will be carefully evaluated and managed to ensure they align with the character of the surrounding neighborhoods.

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We remain committed to maintaining an open dialogue with residents throughout this process, addressing concerns, and incorporating feedback to ensure that the Arts District benefits the entire community.