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Florida Attorney General's Office News Release

Ritz Theatre Preservation Efforts Moving Forward

TALLAHASSEE, Fla.—The ongoing legal obstacles delaying the preservation and revival of the historic Ritz Theatre in Winter Haven have come to an end. After years of turmoil, the Attorney General's Office pursued action to save the Ritz from neglect, mismanagement and threats of closure. Circuit Judge Catherine Combee has now approved an agreement eliminating the final remaining legal barriers, and the Ritz has resolved the problems that led to the Attorney General's involvement in the case. The Ritz is a key part of downtown Winter Haven and is cherished by the community. The building was built in 1925 and is on the National Registry for Historical Places.

Attorney General Ashley Moody said, "I am glad that our office was able to protect this major community asset, and these final Court actions will allow the theatre to thrive as a historical landmark in Polk County."

The Attorney General's Office, whose involvement came about at the behest of the Winter Haven community and the State Attorney for the 10th Judicial Circuit, brought suit in March 2018 against the Ritz Theatre 100, Inc., a non-profit corporation tasked with renovating and operating the theatre, and its executive director. At the time, the Ritz suffered from mismanagement and financial problems, and despite substantial grants, gifts, and funding from the state of Florida, Polk County, the city of Winter Haven, and others to pay for needed renovations and operating costs, the Ritz remained underutilized and in danger of closure. While a State Attorney's Office investigation into a fraudulent lien on the theatre resulted in no criminal charges, sufficient concerns were raised to warrant a referral to the Attorney General. The Attorney General's Office then pursued action to impede the financial repercussions and get the Ritz back on track.

The Attorney General's Office sought an appointment of a receiver, an accounting, and the withdrawal of a lien on the theatre's assets in favor of its executive director, who has since resigned. The Court granted the Attorney General's motions to prevent the sale of the Ritz property and to appoint as its receiver the Honorable Charles A. Davis, Jr., a former Second Circuit Court of Appeal judge. This immediate request for an appointed receiver gave full authority of the Ritz to the receiver, including reviewing all financial decisions and controlling further expenditures until legal resolution.

In the most recent action, the Court approved the settlement of the Ritz's dispute with its former executive director, resulting in the release of her lien. The Ritz's outside insurance carrier funded the majority of the settlement proceeds. The Court also approved the proposed refinancing of the Ritz property. With these final legal agreements in place, the Ritz is now well-positioned to become the centerpiece of downtown Winter Haven and the community asset so many have envisioned it could be.