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Coming soon: Luxury movie theater twin bill

Atlanta Business Chronicle - by [Lisa R. Schoolcraft](#) Staff Writer

Two upscale movie theaters are in the works for Buckhead and Brookhaven.

Ben Carter Properties LLC has filed plans for a 280-seat, seven-screen movie theater in The Streets of Buckhead redevelopment project while The Sembler Co. plans to add a seven-screen theater to Town Brookhaven.

Even Tucker, near Northlake Mall, is getting a new movie theater, though not at the luxury level planned for Buckhead or Brookhaven.

The proposed movie theaters are among the new generation of upscale theaters, with leather seats, food and adult beverages, and smaller auditoriums for a "private screening" feel.

Ben Carter Properties wants to put the theater on the site where the vacant Three Dollar Cafe sits, said Jeff Shell, chairman of Neighborhood Planning Unit-B, which oversees the area that includes The Streets of Buckhead.

The theater would be on the lower level of a revamped site plan, he said.

The Peachtree and Pharr roads site is where Ben Carter Properties initially planned a hotel with Barry Hotel Partners, in a venture with Starwood Capital. Barry Hotel Partners, a division of Barry Real Estate Cos. Inc., pulled out of the deal in January, but the hotel plans continue.

The \$1.5 billion The Streets of Buckhead spans eight city blocks over 9 acres and is vying to bring luxury retail to the former Buckhead Village area.

Atlanta-based Ben Carter Properties expects the first phase of The Streets of Buckhead, which will include retail, restaurant, residential, hotel and office space, to be complete in fall 2009. The hotels and proposed theater are later phases of the project.

Dinner and a movie

Buckhead, in particular, is ripe for movie theater expansion, with just two theaters, one at Phipps Plaza and one at Tower Place, retail sources in Atlanta say. Lenox Square had a six-screen theater, but that closed in June 2003.

Adult movie-goers are coming back to the theaters "and there is a desire to reach out to those customers," said Patrick Corcoran, director of media and research for the National Association of Theater Owners, based in Washington, D.C. "They don't want just a movie, but something beyond that."

Movie theater owners are responding, offering nicer seats, smaller auditoriums, a higher level of food and beverage service, and valet parking, in some cases, Corcoran said.

"They are aiming at customers who not only have more disposable income, but are used to getting more for what they spend," he said.

So national, regional and smaller brands are all rolling out upscale movie theaters with those services, he said.

Just such a theater is planned for Sembler's Town Brookhaven, which opens in summer 2009, said Jeff Fuqua, Sembler president. Cinébistro will be a 700-seat, seven-screen theater in the mixed-use redevelopment project near Oglethorpe University.

A concept by Cobb Theatres LLP of Birmingham, Ala., Cinébistro offers upscale full-menu dining in a movie theater designed for those 21 and older, he said. Cinébistro will also be Cobb Theatres' first theater in the Atlanta market.

"We're not a chain restaurant," said Jeremy Welman, Cobb Theatres chief operating officer. "We're really a restaurant that shows movies."

Patrons can order off a full menu in the dining room or bar area, or from a smaller menu inside the theater, he said. But no food will be served during the movie, to preserve the movie-going experience.

Cobb Theatres is scouting other Cinébistro locations in Atlanta, Welman said.

"We believe Atlanta is the perfect market for this type of concept," he said.

Atlantans who want to go to dinner and go to a movie often have to do it on two separate days, given traffic and time constraints, he added.

"The biggest problem is finding the right development for this to go into," Welman said. "You won't see one of these on every corner."

Movie Tavern Partners L.P. in Dallas plans to enter metro Atlanta May 2 in the former AMC Northlake theater on Lavista Road in Tucker, said Barbara Carter, a spokeswoman at Movie Tavern.

Movie Tavern is bringing its "original" concept, which allows patrons to order burgers, pizzas, appetizers, salads, desserts, beer, wine and margaritas at a counter. The food is then brought to the movie theater seat, she said. Movie Tavern also has a "premium" concept, which allows patrons to order food from their movie theater seats.

"If you are going to eat and go out to see a movie, why not do both at one time," Carter said.

The movie theater industry is enjoying increased box office attendance, Corcoran said.

Movie theater attendance peaked in 2002, according to the Motion Picture Association of America Inc.'s (MPAA) industry data, at 1.64 billion, then saw a steady decline until it hit its nadir at 1.4 billion in 2005. In 2006, movie theater attendance rose to nearly 1.5 billion. Ticket sales in 2007 will likely show an increase, Corcoran said.

U.S. box office receipts have been fairly steady, MPAA industry data shows, hovering around \$9.5 billion from 2002 to 2004. Box office receipts dipped to \$8.9 billion in 2005, but rose to \$9.5 billion in 2006.

Box office receipts for 2007 are expected to be \$9.6 billion, he said.

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