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Anatole Ashraf
Chairperson

Debra Markell Kleinert
District Manager

April 22, 2024

RE: JW/Bliss Theater Preservation

Dear Elected Officials:

Queens Community Board 2 is writing to urge your support in preserving the historic Bliss Theater building located at 44-17 Greenpoint Avenue in Sunnyside and facilitating its adaptive reuse as a community cultural center.

The Bliss Theater, opened in 1930, is a rare surviving example of an Egyptian Revival style Art Deco movie palace in New York City. Its highly ornate polychrome terracotta facade with striking architectural details like lotus flowers, columns, and a distinctive marquee remarkably remain intact after nearly a century. As one of the few remaining historic anchors in Sunnyside, the Bliss Theater holds deep cultural significance and connections to our community's past and present.

Currently owned by the Jehovah's Witnesses congregation, the Bliss Theater property is now up for sale, presenting a unique opportunity to reclaim this space for public access and community use. Indoor gathering spaces are essential for a healthy, culturally vibrant neighborhood, but Sunnyside has lost several significant assembly spaces over the past 20 years. Allowing this architecturally and historically significant theater to be demolished or redeveloped without preserving its character would be a tremendous loss. An initial Request for Evaluation has been submitted to the Landmarks Preservation Commission to explore individual landmark designation for the building, which will require strong public support. Outreach efforts have also been made to the current owners about potentially collaborating on a preservation-minded vision, though no substantive discussions have occurred yet. While the property's zoning permits substantial additional development, the current structure utilizes only a fraction of the buildable square footage. This creates an opportunity to construct additional space while preserving the historic auditorium through mechanisms like transferring development rights to an adjacent site.

There is strong support from local residents, cultural groups like the Thalia Spanish Theater, and civic organizations to preserve and adaptively reuse the Bliss Theater as a multi-faceted arts and cultural center. Hosting public performances, celebrations, job fairs, artisan markets and more would bring vibrancy and economic benefits to the Greenpoint Avenue business corridor. As a long-standing cultural institution and the first bilingual Spanish theater in Queens, the Thalia Spanish Theater has expressed keen interest in anchoring programming at the Bliss Theater. With a larger auditorium, the Thalia could significantly expand its offerings of Spanish-language plays, musicals, dance performances and other

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Hispanic arts events to serve the vibrant communities of Sunnyside and Western Queens. The Bliss would provide the Thalia a permanent home befitting its importance as a cornerstone of Hispanic culture.

Queens Community Board 2 urges you to take the following two actions to facilitate the preservation and community-oriented adaptive reuse of this iconic Sunnyside landmark:

1. Support efforts to secure the building's landmark designation to protect its architecturally significant features.
2. Assist in identifying and securing capital funding sources to aid the Thalia Spanish Theater in purchasing the property.

The loss of the Bliss Theater would deprive Sunnyside of a vital community asset and piece of our neighborhood's history and identity. We have a rare chance to save this architectural gem and repurpose it to uplift local arts, culture and economic vibrancy. Thank you for your consideration of this important issue. We welcome further discussion on collaborating to preserve the Bliss Theater for our community's benefit.

Sincerely,



Debra Markell Kleinert
District Manager, CB 2



Anatole Ashraf
Chairperson, CB 2



Christine Hunter
Chair, Land Use &
Housing Committee



Prameet Kumar
Vice Chair, Land Use &
Housing Committee



Karesia Batan,
Chair, Arts & Cultural Committee

Honorable Grace Meng, US Congress
Honorable Nydia M. Velazquez, US Congress
Honorable Michael Gianaris, NY State Senate
Honorable Kristen Gonzalez, NY State Senate
Honorable Jessica Ramos, NY State Senate
Honorable Juan Ardila, NYS Assembly
Honorable Jessica Gonzalez-Rojas, NYS Assembly
Honorable Zohran Mamdani, NYS Assembly
Honorable Steven Raga, NYS Assembly
Honorable Robert Holden, NYC Council Member
Honorable Shekar Krishnan, NYC Council Member
Honorable Julie Won, NYC Council Member
Honorable Donovan Richards, Queens Borough President