



## PRESERVATION SOCIETY OF NASHVILLE BELLE MEADE THEATRE REDEVELOPMENT NARRATIVE October 2023

The Preservation Society of Nashville's mission is to protect and champion Nashville's unique stories, neighborhoods, and architecture through education, advocacy, and historic preservation.

### Historical & Architectural Significance

The Belle Meade Theatre was built by Tony Sudekum's Crescent Amusement Company and was designed by Marr & Hollman, opening on May 1, 1940. Sudekum owned many of the movie theaters in Nashville at the time, including early theaters like the Princess and Knickerbocker, which started the silent movie era and were later converted to sound. Marr & Hollman were known for designing the Broadway Post Office, which is now the Frist Art Museum.

The Theatre was built in the suburbs at the time and reflected the changing landscape of Nashville. Neighborhoods grew and housing, retail, and some commerce moved out of downtown. The "art deco-modern" masterpiece, which included a substantial marquee with an 80-foot tower featuring 1,600 neon, fluorescent, and colored lights, is now considered one of the only remaining examples of this architectural style in the state of Tennessee.



*The new Belle Meade Theater is all illuminated on a spring night in late April of 1940 as the final touches are being made for the grand opening on May 1. | Credit: The Tennessean*

Still clad with gray and black Georgia marble on the front façade, the building is one of the few structures in the Belle Meade neighborhood that references the area's early history. Most of the surrounding area has been redeveloped over decades, leaving very few remaining historic structures. Its unique style and rarity make it a significant contributing structure, a defining element of the area's character.



*The Belle Meade Theater is hosting the movie premiere of the "Coal Miner's Daughter" that Loretta Lynn and family are attending along with some of the stars of the movie March 4, 1980. | Credit: Frank Empson, The Tennessean*

Aside from the venue's architectural prominence, the once 1,100-seat Belle Meade started as a "neighborhood theater" eventually becoming a hot spot for movie stars, musicians, and politicians where classic movies such as "Gone with the Wind," "Coal Miner's Daughter," "The Sound of Music," and "Wilma" premiered. Culturally, the Theatre became an entertainment hub and destination for the neighborhood and surrounding areas for decades. Many current Nashvillians can recall fond memories of the beloved theatre.

## History of Preservation-Minded Reuse

The owners of the Belle Meade Theatre have been faced with a changing business landscape over the last several decades. However, at nearly every turn, preservation-minded decisions were made regarding the reuse of the Theatre. In February 1991, the Belle Meade Theatre screened its last movie. By October of that year, a new bookstore, Bookstar, was opened, carrying more than 120,000 new books and periodicals. At that time, much of the front façade and marquee were refurbished.

By the early 2000s, developers turned the property into a mixed-use complex, including AmSouth Bank, Harris Teeter grocery store, 54 apartments, and other retail space. Over the decades, numerous businesses have operated out of the repurposed space, including Moon Drugs, FedEx Office, Mattress Firm, Top Hat Cleaners, and others.



*Cummings Sign Company employee Roy Hughes signals co-worker Pat Hostettler as they secured the marquee sign of the former Belle Meade Theater after removing it from the building Aug. 20, 1991. The sign will be refurbished to original condition and return. | Credit: Freeman Ramsey, The Tennessean*



*Belle Meade Kroger - Preliminary SP Rendering, Dated September 27, 2023 | Credit: Bradford Allen, Southeastern Development Associates*

## Overview of the Redevelopment

The development, sometimes referenced as the “Ridgefield Way” development or “Belle Meade Kroger” project, is a proposed commercial project at the site of the historic, former Belle Meade Theatre. The 3.97-acre property is located at 4301 Harding Pike, Nashville, TN 37205, not to be confused with the already-approved Belle Meade Plaza or Harding Town Center projects within a half-mile on Harding Pike.

The developers recently submitted a new development plan, dated September 27, 2023, to the Metro Nashville Planning Department and Commission.

In the proposed six-story complex, the Belle Meade Kroger would occupy the 1<sup>st</sup> floor (56,300 sq. ft.) and residential apartments would occupy the 2<sup>nd</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> floors (258,785 sq. ft.) (74 studio units, 118 one-bedroom units, and 44 two-bedroom units). Expansion of the current underground parking garage is proposed, including a total of 572 parking spaces, 290 for residential parking and 282 for retail parking.

The current plans indicate a complete demolition of all existing built elements, including the historic portions of the complex. The marquee and obelisk that are shown are either a stylized interpretation of the original pieces or a reinstallation and restoration of the historic elements.

The property is currently zoned MUL (Mixed Use Limited), which has very specific standards relating to setbacks and other development measures. The current proposed plans would not meet these standards, and as such, the developer is seeking a rezoning to SP (Specific Plan), which is a completely customized zoning designation, tailored to the exact needs of the development plans. A rezoning process will be followed to seek approval of the plans.

## Status of the Project

The development plan was originally submitted to the Metro Nashville Planning Department for consideration in November 2022. At that time, the department staff provided feedback and the developer worked internally to integrate the feedback and further develop the design.

Recently, the updated plan was again submitted to the Planning Department by the deadline for the November 9, 2023 Metro Nashville Planning Commission meeting. However, the agenda for that meeting has not been published yet. It may be heard during that meeting or a future meeting.

The Preservation Society of Nashville appreciates the ongoing discussions with Council Member Brenda Gadd, Metro Planning, and the Historical Commission staff. We have requested a meeting with the owner/development team to get clarification of some unknowns and to discuss our recommendations.

## Public Process Overview

In a rezoning process, the proposed development plan would follow this public, iterative process:

### Planning Commission

1. **Submittal:** Developer submits plans to Metro Nashville Planning Department
2. **Staff Review:** Planning Department staff review the plans and provide feedback (The Commission reviews the plans against the zoning ordinance, urban design overlay standards, mobility studies, etc.)
3. **Revisions:** Developer makes changes and resubmits plans (if needed)
4. **Secondary Staff Review:** Planning Department staff review the plans again and make a recommendation of approval or denial to the Planning Commission
5. **Commission Hearing:** Development Plan is reviewed by the Metro Nashville Planning Commission (Public meeting with option for public comment)
6. **Vote:** If the plan is approved by the Planning Commission, it will advance to Metro Council for review. If it is denied by the Planning Commission, the developer can make changes, per the Commission's recommendations and resubmit or initiate a planning appeal.

### Metro Nashville Council

1. **1<sup>st</sup> Reading – Pro Forma:** The first reading is a pro forma reading meant to inform the councilmembers and public of the proposed plans. Usually, the application is voted on and almost always passes as means to proceed to the 2<sup>nd</sup> hearing.
2. **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading – Public Hearing:** The second reading is the public hearing where the general public can speak in support or opposition of the proposed plans. If plans are voted for approval, they continue on to the 3<sup>rd</sup> reading two weeks later.
3. **3<sup>rd</sup> Reading – Final Vote:** Typically plans that receive a vote for approval during the second reading will also be approved in the final vote. Occasionally modifications are made to reflect public or Council Member input during the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading. Once passed, the development plan has its entitlements to move forward with permitting.

*Resources Metropolitan Government of Nashville & Davidson County, The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings, The Tennessean*