

Avon Theatre

STRATEGIC PLAN 2024-2029

November 12, 2024

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Executive Summary

In 2024, the Avon Theatre engaged Creative Capacity, LLC to facilitate a strategic planning process. The organization had already done significant strategic work as part of developing a plan for renovating its historic theatre, and wanted to build an adaptive strategic plan to guide its overall growth over the upcoming years.

The Avon gathered feedback and data to inform its planning in a number of ways, including:

- One-on-one interviews with Avon's senior staff and board leaders.
- An online survey for Avon Trustees, staff, and strategic planning committee members.
- A survey that was distributed to both current audiences and the wider community.
- Interviews with community partners and local leaders.
- A market research project conducted by the Harvard Business School Alumni Club of Connecticut.
- Two organizational planning retreats in June and November of 2024, attended by Trustees and staff.

This work resulted in a five year adaptive strategic plan for the Avon.

Adaptive plans focus on vision, objectives, and overall strategic direction. The plan also includes broad strategies to illustrate the kind of work that is likely to take place; each strategy is followed by examples of potential projects or action steps that might be pursued. In order to maximize responsiveness to changing community needs and circumstances, this plan does not commit the Avon to specific action steps. Annual planning will determine the best options for pursuing the organization's strategic objectives each year.

Mission

To engage the greater Stamford community in film, education, and cultural events, bringing people of all walks of life together in a historic theatre that evokes the golden age of cinema.

Vision

To be a vibrant and welcoming community center that enriches the soul and stimulates the mind through interactions with the art of cinema.

Strategy Pillars

Through its planning process, the Avon identified these pillars to guide overall strategy in the years ahead.

- **Community Cultural Center** – The Avon will grow into an essential cultural center for the greater Stamford community, with cinema arts at its heart.
- **Educational enrichment** – Working with the Stamford Public Schools, the Avon can provide engaging educational experiences that help students to explore key concepts through film.
- **Grow to sustainability** – Growing the Avon’s programs, impact, and finances will lead to a more sustainable long-term business model.
- **Breakeven budget** – By FY29, the Avon will need a balanced, breakeven annual budget. This target is more complicated than it might seem, since expenses will also grow during this time period in order to support expanded theatre operations, programming, marketing, and development. Growth in contributed income, especially through annual fundraisers, will be key to achieving this.
- **Diversified revenue model** – The Avon needs to have multiple sources of revenue. In the coming years, new options for increasing both earned and contributed revenue will be tested. The strategies that achieve the best results will receive continued investment. Five years from now, we will have multiple robust revenue lines.
- **Retention is part of growth** – Growing the size of our audience and our members is essential to long-term success. Retaining current audiences/members, especially during the renovation closure, will be necessary if we want to see overall growth in participation.
- **Staff expansion** – In order to support the Avon Theatre following its renovation and achieve the goals of this new strategic plan, the Avon will need to significantly invest in new staff positions and an expanded organization chart.

Summary of Goals and Objectives

Goal #1: Renovate the Avon, preserving its historic character and equipping it to be a state-of-the-art venue for film and cultural events.

- Raise the money needed to fund the renovations to the Avon.
- Complete the planned renovations, preserving the Avon's historic features, integrating advanced cinema technology, and increasing accessibility.
- Implement a transition fund to bridge the gap between current operations, the renovation closure, and the launch of the refurbished Avon.
- Implement an annual capital maintenance plan to keep the theatre in top condition.

Goal #2: Expand the Avon's role as a community cultural center, with engaging films, events, and education experiences on offer every day.

- Beginning in year three of the plan, increase annual attendance by 30%, from 45,000 to 58,500.
- Expand programming to include events in all three theatres on most days of the year.
- Drive interest and enthusiasm through collaborative community partnerships.
- Expand education programs, especially for young people, that use film as a springboard for experiential learning.

Goal #3: Strengthen the Avon's brand visibility throughout Fairfield County.

- Beginning in year three of the plan, increase annual attendance by 30%, from 45,000 to 58,500.
- Expand recognition of the Avon as an essential community resource throughout the County.
- Relaunch the Avon's brand when it reopens following the renovations, and maintain a permanently enhanced level of visibility and recognition.

Goal #4: Increase annual revenue to support expanded operations and impact.

- Increase earned revenue by 30% in year 3, 4 & 5 of the plan.
- Increase contributed revenue by 30% in year 3, 4 & 5 of the plan.
- Increase Avon membership by 10% each year following the reopening.
- Build a business model that balances earned and contributed revenue (35/65 to 30/70).

Goal #5: Build the Avon's core infrastructure for long-term sustainability.

- Strengthen the Avon's systems to support smoother operations and better data collection and analysis.
- Rebuild a sustainable expanded staff structure to support the Avon reCreated and its new activities.
- Enhance the board's composition to better represent different facets of our community.
- Revise the board's structure, expectations, and practices to align with the Avon's strategic goals.

Pursuing Our Strategic Goals

This adaptive plan provides a strategic framework for the Avon for five fiscal years, from April 2024 to March 2029. Given the time frame, the plan is designed to articulate the Avon's vision and goals while providing flexibility in the strategies used to achieve them. Strategies and tactics will be developed each year as part of the organization's annual planning.

This plan includes broad strategies to illustrate the kind of work that is likely to take place; each strategy is followed by examples of potential projects or action steps that might be pursued to fulfill the objectives. In order to maximize responsiveness to changing community needs and market conditions, this plan does not commit the Avon to specific projects or action steps. Annual planning will determine the best options for pursuing the organization's strategic objectives.

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Strategy #1: Complete the capital campaign by the end of FY29.

- Meet the campaign's goal and secure payment of all pledges by the end of FY29.

Strategy #2: Launch renovations only when sufficient pledges have been paid to fund the financial demands of construction.

- Continuously assess fulfilled campaign donations vs. pledged amounts to determine readiness to meet construction expenses and limit the use of the non-revolving building credit line.
- Ensure that funds are available to support continued operations even when the theatre is closed for renovations.

Strategy #3: Invest in ongoing capital maintenance to maintain the condition of the Avon over time.

- Build an annual capital maintenance plan.
- Annually budget for maintenance and upgrades for the facility and technology.

Goal #2: Expand the Avon's role as a community cultural center, with engaging films, events, and education experiences on offer every day.

- Beginning in year three of the plan, increase annual attendance by 30%, from 45,000 to 58,500.
 - Expand programming to include events in all three theatres on most days of the year.
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Strategy #1: Expand film programming.

- Secure first run films.
- Develop film series that highlight topics, ideas, or cultures.
- Adopt a season planning model for film series, allowing them to be developed with community partners and supported by sponsorship revenue.
- Explore partnerships and alliances with established film festivals (e.g. Greenwich International Film Festival, French Cinema, Jewish Film Festival etc.), to bring additional film programs and audiences to the Avon.
- Use the new third theatre to show independent films without creating schedule conflicts with first-run features.
- Experiment with hosting films created by local filmmakers, students, etc.

Strategy #2: Expand the variety of programs at the Avon.

- Pilot hosting other types of events, such as small concerts, live streams, comedy, poetry slams, or other events that would bring people to the Avon.
- Strengthen community partnerships that co-create, promote, and build participation in events and series.
- Test new product lines to build interest among different audiences.
- Increase corporate and community rentals of the Avon for meetings and events.

Strategy #3: Build a consistent, effective experiential education program.

- In partnership with the Stamford Public School District, create experiential learning opportunities that use films to support student engagement on a variety of subjects.
- Develop opportunities for high school students to learn about filmmaking, the film industry, and related creative careers.
- Strengthen our partnership with the University of Connecticut at Stamford, to draw more university students to the Avon.

- Continue to invest in live events (such as Q&A's, talkbacks) that put films in context and give audiences a behind the scenes look at the art form.

Strategy #4: Strengthen community partnerships.

- Launch the *Avon on Tour* program while the building is closed for renovations, hosting events at a variety of locations in partnership with different community groups.
- Position the Avon as a community asset that is welcoming to all by hosting events in partnership with other groups (i.e., hosting a film series about climate change with an environmental advocacy group, or hosting movies from a particular country with a civic association for people with that heritage).

Goal #3: Strengthen the Avon's brand visibility throughout Fairfield County.

- Beginning in year three of the plan, increase annual attendance by 30%, from 45,000 to 58,500.
 - Expand recognition of the Avon as an essential community resource throughout the County.
 - Relaunch the Avon's brand when it reopens following the renovations, and maintain a permanently enhanced level of visibility and recognition.
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Strategy #1: Develop a comprehensive marketing strategy.

- Use the renovation period to reboot the Avon's brand and develop all related assets.
- Design and launch a new website.
- Annually develop a marketing and public relations plan with clear objectives and strategies designed to increase participation among target audiences.
- Increase strategic investments in promotion both online and in the community.

Strategy #2: Invest in relationship marketing that will drive attendance from new demographics.

- Collaborate with community organizations and local institutions to co-create and promote programs and series that will engage their participants.
- Cultivate opinion leaders from key audiences, and provide them with the tools to encourage attendance.

Strategy #3: Invest in marketing and services that make audience members feel welcome.

- Include more logistical information on the redesigned website (*Plan Your Visit* section with clear directions, parking information, dining and shopping options, etc.).
- Ensure that Avon audiences have access to adequate parking.
- Continue to collaborate with the downtown business association on providing visible security.

Strategy #4: Invest in community-based events through *Avon on Tour* when the theatre is closed for renovations.

- Present engaging film events at community locations around the region, connecting with current audiences and introducing the Avon to prospective new audiences.
- Design "more than a film screening" events with talkbacks, artist participation, etc. to demonstrate how the Avon differs from a mainstream moviegoing experience.

Strategy #5: Promote the Avon as a cultural gem of Stamford, raising awareness of its value to the community.

- Raise awareness of the Avon's nonprofit status, both among its members and in the wider community.
- Promote the value that the Avon brings to the region, such as its impact on young people through school programs and partnerships, its economic impact on Stamford's downtown, its function as a community convening space, etc.

Strategy #6: Implement ongoing patron feedback systems.

- Routinely survey patrons to understand their interests and needs.
- Offer other opportunities for feedback, especially when people visit (suggestion box, QR code to a virtual suggestion box in the preshow, staff availability to receive feedback as people exit, etc.).

Goal #4: Increase annual revenue to support expanded operations and impact.

By the end of FY29, the Avon will:

- Increase earned revenue by 30% in year 3, 4 & 5 of the plan.
 - Increase contributed revenue by 30% in year 3, 4 & 5 of the plan.
 - Increase Avon membership by 10% each year following the reopening.
 - Build a business model that balances earned and contributed revenue (35/65 to 30/70).
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Strategy #1: Increase the number of Avon members.

- Review the current membership structure and adjust as needed to make membership appealing to more people.
- Increase the appeal of Carte Blanche memberships through new features and incentives.
- Amplify membership marketing year-round, conducting multiple acquisition and renewal campaigns.
- Focus on retaining current members through excellent service and personalized renewal campaigns.
- Use the *Avon on Tour* program during the renovation closure to stay in touch with current members and maintain their participation.

Strategy #2: Increase corporate and business partnerships.

- Organize some programs, such as signature film series, into packages that can be sponsored.
- Build mutually beneficial partnerships with Stamford businesses, positioning the Avon as a key economic engine.
- Promote the Avon Theatre for private and corporate events during times when public screenings are not offered.

Strategy #3: Continue to expand our individual donor base.

- Continue to host an annual gala fundraiser featuring a celebrity to bring the community together and generate a significant source of unrestricted revenue.
- Conduct donor acquisition and cultivation activities in our core communities, particularly Stamford and Greenwich.
- Maximize use of the CRM's ability to store information about our supporters, to strengthen long-term relationship building.

Strategy #4: Explore new earned revenue opportunities, and invest in the most profitable options.

- Expand concessions offerings.
- Maximize revenue from the new bar.
- Rent the theatre for private events.

Strategy #5: Launch an endowment for the Avon.

- Following the completion of the renovation, develop a planned giving program to support an endowment.

Goal #5: Build the Avon's core infrastructure for long-term sustainability.

- Strengthen the Avon's systems to support smoother operations and better data collection and analysis.
 - Rebuild a sustainable expanded staff structure to support the Avon reCreated and its new activities.
 - Enhance the board's composition to better represent different facets of our community.
 - Revise the board's structure, expectations, and practices to align with the Avon's strategic goals.
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Strategy #1: Invest in technology that will enhance operations.

- Update ticketing, donor management, and financial software systems and processes to minimize administrative work and maximize data that can be used in decision making.
- Expand capacity to use audience data to enhance marketing, fundraising, and programming strategies.
- Keep IT hardware and software up to date both at the theatre and in the office.

Strategy #2: Increase staff capacity.

- Add staff positions required to operate the theatre effectively following its reopening, including new back office positions that will drive participation, support, and smooth operations (e.g. development, marketing/PR, finance etc.).

Strategy #3: Focus on board development.

- Revise the by-laws to reflect the governance structure that the Avon needs to support its growth.
- Update structures and policies that guide the board's work.
 - Develop a board member position description that clarifies expectations.
 - Update the committee structure, including clear objectives for each committee.
- Assess board composition in light of strategic goals, and make a plan for recruiting new members that emphasizes greater diversity in geography, professional experience, age, and race and ethnic background.
- Enhance the orientation process for new board members.
- Re-envision the role and value of the Advisory Board.

Strategy Screen

While this plan identifies likely strategies, changing conditions and unexpected opportunities will influence plan implementation. This strategy screen can help to assess how well a potential action aligns with our strategic direction.

The questions in the strategy screen are drawn from the planning process and can be adjusted over time as we learn about which factors are most critical to our success.

Strategy screens are not absolute – an idea that scores poorly on the screen might still be pursued, and an idea that scores well might be dismissed. The screening process is meant to inform discussion around decisions. Each participant in the discussion should score the opportunity individually. Then the group can compare scores, discuss their reasoning, and make a decision about how to proceed.

Scoring: 3 = Yes, absolutely 1 = Not very well
 2 = Somewhat 0 = Not at all/actively works against the priority

Strategy Alignment Questions	Score
1. Will this directly support our mission?	
2. Is this idea likely to engage new audience members?	
3. Does it help to position the Avon as a well-known community cultural resource?	
4. Will it help us to maintain the Avon as a historic, accessible, state of the art venue?	
5. Does it demonstrate how the Avon differs from more mainstream moviegoing experiences?	
6. Will it provide added value for our members?	
7. Is it likely to encourage new people to become members or donors?	
8. Will it either create a new, reliable stream of revenue or increase one of our existing revenue streams in a meaningful way?	
9. Is this the right time for this idea? Are we likely to be able to make meaningful progress in 1-2 years of implementation?	
10. Do we currently have the staff capacity and expertise to carry out this idea effectively?	
11. Will this idea generate a profit (3), break even (2), lose some money (1), lose a lot of money (0)?	

This overall scoring rubric can provide additional context for discussion. Again, scores should not be considered absolute decisions; they are a data point in decision making.

28-33 This is a great idea, we should do it
23-27 This is a good idea. Can we make it better?
19-22 This idea has some challenges to overcome before we decide.
16-18 This idea has significant challenges to overcome.
0-15 This idea is not well-aligned with our goals and strategy.