



## Every other downtown theater has reopened after 2020 — but Spreckels is still dark

By Drew Sitton | Originally published on [timesofsandiego.com](https://www.timesofsandiego.com) on November 25, 2025

For nearly six years, the Spreckels Theatre has remained closed, its marquee frozen in time since 2020 with a message urging the community to "stay safe and socially distance." The promise that "our curtain will rise again soon" remains unfulfilled as the historic Broadway venue stands as a visible reminder of the early COVID-19 pandemic era.

The 1,400-seat theater, located in the six-story Spreckels Theater Building, has not hosted a performance since two sold-out concerts in February 2020. While neighboring downtown theaters including the Balboa Theatre, Civic Theatre, and the newly renovated Lyceum Theatre have reopened and resumed regular operations, Spreckels remains shuttered.

In April 2021, private equity firms Taconic Capital Advisors and Triangle Capital Group, both NYC-based, purchased the national historic landmark for \$26.5 million with an \$18 million bridge loan from Thorofare Capital. The firms promised architect Ware Malcolmb would oversee restoration, with ASM Global managing operations. However, no substantive plans have materialized. The city has records of only two permit applications in five years – one for plumbing work and another for concrete infill that expired without completion.

Representatives from the current ownership entities did not respond to requests for comment. Councilmember Stephen Whitburn stated he has never met with the theater's owners, though he expressed hope for "a thoughtful project that brings activity and energy back to the area while still honoring the theater's legacy."

The closure marks a dramatic departure from the theater's previous era. Jacquelyn Littlefield, the previous owner, purchased the property in 1962 for \$1.65 million and held it until her death in 2019. Her father, Louis B. Metzger, had leased the theater starting in 1931. According to historical accounts, Metzger urged his 22-year-old daughter on his deathbed to "hold onto his favorite property's lease, buy it if possible, and never let it be demolished."

Littlefield honored this legacy, becoming a fierce protector of the theater. When developers and city officials pressured her to allow demolition for office towers, she famously responded: "Would you take a knife to a Picasso?" She was branded by some as "the difficult woman" for her resistance to demolition proposals, yet her stewardship kept the theater operating throughout her ownership.

Beyond maintaining the venue's operation, Littlefield became instrumental in San Diego's performing arts ecosystem. She advanced initiatives including the San Diego International Fringe Festival, Mainly Mozart, and Arts Tix. In 1978, she temporarily housed The Old Globe's productions when their building burned down. Despite tensions with the downtown establishment, Fringe Festival artists and others mourned her contributions to the local arts community when she died at age 96 in a La Jolla nursing home.

A year after Littlefield's death, commercial real estate firm Cushman & Wakefield listed the property for sale, initiating the sequence of events that led to its current dormant state. Today, the theater remains a preserved but inactive landmark, its stage dark while the city works toward broader downtown revitalization efforts.

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