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Expansion set for Arena Grand

By Mike Pramik

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The Arena Grand Theatre is expanding and turning to a different management company to run it.

Columbus Hospitality will operate what by April will be an 11-screen theater across from Nationwide Arena. It will replace Drexel Theatres Group, which has operated the Arena Grand since its opening in 2001.

Nationwide Realty Investors, which owns the Arena Grand, plans to pump \$1 million into the development, including three new theaters. A 60-seat theater will replace retail space that most recently housed a Ben & Jerry's shop. Two 48-seat theaters will be located in a building at 155 W. Nationwide Blvd.

In addition, Nationwide will add about 3,000 square feet of retail space along Nationwide Boulevard and a 500-square-foot meeting area inside the theater building.

Drexel Theatres will continue to operate the Arena Grand until the end of January. Then, Columbus Hospitality will take over as construction begins.

Nationwide Realty president Brian Ellis said the expansion is in response to recent competition that hurt attendance in 2006. Two theaters opened in central Ohio in 2005: the 18-screen Rave Motion Pictures at Polaris and the eight-screen Drexel Gateway.

Adding theaters, Ellis said, will help because the Arena Grand can show the most-popular movies on multiple screens.

"If someone wants an 8 o'clock movie now, and we're showing it only at 7:30, they can probably find some other venue," he said.

Ellis said bringing Columbus Hospitality on board was an easy choice. The company manages four Nationwide Realty-owned properties at or near the Arena District: the

Crowne Plaza Hotel, the Lofts hotel, Max & Erma's restaurant and the Arena District Athletic Club.

Columbus Hospitality president Charles Lagarce said he wants to position the Arena Grand as a "more entertaining movie-going experience."

In addition to showing popular movies on multiple screens, that means culling more corporate and group business. The theater already has meeting space on its top floor.

Lagarce said the current managers of the theater will remain in place. Still, there could be a new feel to the place.

Through its 25 years in the business, Drexel Theatres has become known for independent movies, foreign flicks and low-budget titles. It also operates the Drexel in Bexley, the Drexel Grandview and Drexel Gateway.

Drexel Theatres president Jeff Frank said the Arena Grand was successful, citing several design and customer-satisfaction awards.

"This is an amicable decision by both parties," Frank said. "We certainly learned a lot running the theater for five years, learning the commercial side of the movie business."

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