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NOTICED; A Movie House's Happy Ending

By ELIZABETH MAKER

AS word spread through Litchfield County that the Bantam Cinema, a quaint and quirky movie house hidden in a rustic red barn, had been sold, anxiety mounted.

What would happen to Connecticut's oldest continuously operated movie house, revered for some 80 years as a cultural oasis, where celebrities, socialites and soccer moms alike congregate for quality films? Would the unassuming theater with no marquee, no neon signs and fresh-baked concessions be taken over by a commercial movie chain or, worse, turned into a convenience store?

The suspense ended with the news that the owner, Lisa Hedley, had sold to three Litchfield residents who have no intention of changing anything, other than maybe offering a little butter to go with the organic popcorn.

"We all share Ms. Hedley's passion for fine film, and we're all dedicated to preserving the integrity of this wonderful gem of a cinema," said Sidney Koch, a retired investment banker who bought the Bantam on Jan. 2 with his son, David, and Elizabeth Merz.

"Everyone can relax," said David Koch, a location assistant for "The Sopranos." "We're keeping the same movie booker, and the overall ambiance will stay the same. We love the place."

The new owners, who call their company Spinning Reels, plan to continue Ms. Hedley's "Meet the Filmmaker" program, which invites actors like Mia Farrow and Liza Minnelli to talk about their films with the audience after the show. They have also started a weekly e-mail newsletter.

Ms. Hedley is the president of the new spa at the Mayflower Inn in Washington and of the nonprofit Children of Difference Foundation, which she founded. She said she had decided to sell the 196-seat, 2-screen cinema after 17 years because those two jobs "have me running as fast as I can."

"Something had to give," she said.

Finding just the right buyers was crucial to the sale. "In the past when I thought of selling the cinema, I got too sad and couldn't let it go," Ms. Hedley said. "But I know this group is wonderful; they're committed to smart, artistic film, so I have no seller's remorse."

One longtime Bantam Cinema devotee, John Millington of Washington, was in the audience recently to see "The History Boys." Before the lights went down, he visited with other regulars who were sipping organic coffee and nibbling on Endangered Species Bars or unbuttered organic popcorn.

"Everyone knows everyone here," he said. "You may drive up in a Porsche, but you get a kick out of the ramshackle charm of this place. It's comforting."