Orion Pictures/Film Delivery Building Demolition Position Statement

February 6, 2013: The Historic Kansas City Foundation is saddened to hear about the intended demolition of the Orion Pictures/Film Delivery building at 118 W. 17th Street. Old Film Row is a unique part of Kansas City’s history and the buildings associated with that history should be cherished.

Kansas City's Old Film Row holds not only significance to our city, but to the nation as a whole. As one of the largest—and the last remaining intact—Film Rows in the nation, ours is unique and significant. The buildings are irreplaceable. They tell a story and give us a history, and we should treasure them as other great cities around the world do.

With our city’s renewed interest in the arts and heritage tourism, there are many opportunities to highlight and promote the great history and culture of Kansas City. However, the loss of the Orion Pictures Building would compromise the future of Old Film Row as a destination site, and Kansas City would no longer be able to proudly claim the last intact Film Row in the nation.

We urge the property owner to reconsider the plan to demolish the Orion Pictures Building and to explore alternative sites or concepts that would not result in the demolition of a significant part of our history. We hope that a resolution can be reached that would fulfill the expectations of the property investor, while also preserving the history and character of our city.

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HISTORY OF OLD FILM ROW:

In the days when 96 Million Americans went to the movies each week (as compared to about 28 Million now), Hollywood needed a system by which they could move volumes of film to every corner of the country. This was accomplished by setting up Film Exchanges in the early days of the Nickelodeons. The proprietors would play a film for a while, and then go and exchange it for another. As the industry grew, they became distribution centers for sub-distribution of films to various markets. There were
approximately 32 Exchanges across the country. The exchanges consisted of a distinct area, close to, but not in the Central Business District of major cities. All of the Major Studios were represented with a building, as well as ancillary businesses such as poster warehouses, concession supply companies and other small film companies. The "Film Rows" shared many traits. The buildings were masonry, as film was made of highly flammable nitrate stock up to 1950. They were mostly "Art Deco" as they were built by the Studios in a time when that was the popular architecture. They were usually located in close proximity to one another to serve the needs of their clientele, as well as the practical reason that the highly flammable film could not be right downtown near such densely occupied areas, but close enough to conduct business.

Kansas City's Film Row District is unique. First, it was a very busy exchange, serving Kansas, Missouri and Parts of Oklahoma and Nebraska. It was centrally located, so a tremendous amount of film was shipped through here. It was also very big, due to the fact that the National Screen Service (provider of movie posters and movie trailers (previews) had its national archive here. Further, Commonwealth Theatres (at one time 3rd largest Circuit in the nation) was based on Film Row, as was Durwood Theatres, the predecessor to what is now AMC Theatres. Covering an area centered at the intersection of 18th and Wyandotte, and running 2 or 3 blocks in each direction, ours is the last remaining intact Film Row in the nation. This is largely due to the Urban Sprawl we saw in our region from the 1950s to the present. Instead of expanding beyond our Central Business District, Kansas City went to the suburbs, as well as to the northland in its expansion. Ironically, as we rediscovered our downtown with the Power and Light District and the booming Crossroads area, we found that the Crossroads had many small buildings and warehouses intact, which led to a very accessible place for small business, galleries and offices to thrive. The Film Row Buildings are solidly a part of this magnificent district.