

POOL PROJECT PLODS ON PLAYHOUSE FOUNDATION PERSEVERES, 15 YEARS RUNNING

by Christine Sampson, August 12, 2021

A new public pool and cultural arts center at the Montauk Playhouse Community Center has been a long time coming, and representatives of the nonprofit Montauk Playhouse Community Center Foundation said it will take as long as three more years to secure the \$13 million it needs to finish the building and establish programs there.

Julia McCormack, director of development for the Montauk Playhouse Community Center Foundation, said in a recent interview that the group has raised about \$8 million toward that goal so far. It has been campaigning for support since 2006, though the initial volunteers who first came together to save the building had been working on the project since 1999. The Playhouse is now home to a town hall annex, gymnasium, senior citizens center, and a day care program. The ultimate plan is to build a 25-yard fitness pool and a 30-by-30-foot leisure and therapy pool on the lower level and a 250-seat cultural arts center and event space upstairs.

“When a project starts from a grassroots idea and evolves over time, one of the lessons from that is that it takes time,” Ms. McCormack said. “In Montauk, this is the largest project of its type that has ever been undertaken. The Lighthouse project is actually smaller in terms of cost, and the library renovation is different because that is not just privately funded -- that is being funded by tax dollars, which is fundamentally different. I think it’s very hard to understand if you are a consumer looking at it.”

Significant fund-raising milestones came in January of 2020 with the receipt of \$1 million from an anonymous donor and in 2018 when East Hampton Town committed \$3 million to the project.

The foundation has posted a full business plan and its federal tax documents on its website, montaukplayhouse.org. Those records show the organization ended 2019 with about \$4.67 million in assets. Ms. McCormack said that 81 cents of every dollar donated gets put toward the fund-raising goal. She also said donations have ranged “from \$5 to seven figures,” with the average gift coming in at \$275.

Perry Duryea III, a lifelong Montauk resident who is chairman of the foundation’s board, said in an interview last week that over the past three years it has streamlined its office operations and internal controls. The foundation has also established a community advisory board to help generate ideas and spread the word.

“All of these things are sending a message not only to Montauk but also to visitors that we are not only earnest in what we are trying to do, but also very open and candid,” Mr. Duryea said.

The Covid-19 pandemic presented new challenges for the foundation, Ms. McCormack said. The focus shifted from construction to communication -- helping residents find resources like food and masks, highlighting good deeds, and keeping abreast of the news and needs. “We got tremendous feedback,” she said. “People found it very reassuring.”

More recently, the Montauk Swim Challenge, in an individual and virtual format this year instead of a group swim, was the foundation’s most successful swim challenge to date, with more than \$50,000 raised in July. “At a moment when people are saying virtual events have fatigued, ours continued to grow,” Ms. McCormack said.

Also growing, she said, is the organization’s geographic reach. “We’ve been able to diversify our donor base and communicate on a much more regular basis with our constituents, which is part of the maturing of an organization,” she said. “It tells us that there is a broad appeal. . . . In our early years, full-time residents were the primary donors for the community center. Today, we are receiving gifts from more than half of the states in the U.S. in a given year.”

Mr. Duryea said the playhouse project is more important than ever in a time when change has accelerated. “Montauk needs a focal point. We need a fabric for the community because of the rapid changes you’re seeing here. It would do wonders as a cultural outlet, a physical outlet, and it would be a rallying point. Right now, people need a rallying point.”