

Swimming Pool at Montauk Playhouse Ready To Become Reality



Michael Wright on Apr 12, 2023



The long dreamed-of community swimming pool at the Montauk Playhouse could be a reality within a year.

The Montauk Playhouse Community Center Foundation told the East Hampton Town Board on Tuesday that they have raised the necessary funds to move forward on the multimillion-dollar project and plan to file an application for the swimming pool project soon and hope to break ground on its construction in July.

Adding a community pool to the Playhouse facility was one of the original goals of the Playhouse foundation when it was formed in 1999, the foundation's president, Sarah Iudicone, told the Town Board on April 11.

"For the last 24 years, hundreds of volunteers and thousands of donors have dedicated time and money to the Playhouse foundation's efforts to plan for, design and build a community pool," Iudicone said. "I'm happy to be here to represent all of those who have been waiting for a pool to get built."

The aquatic center will comprise two swimming pools, according to preliminary sketches of the design — one a four-lane, 25-yard-long athletic lap pool, the second a smaller recreation pool that could be used for fitness and wellness programs for seniors and for helping babies acclimate to water. The pool area will be rimmed by changing areas and locker rooms for men and women.

The aquatic center will be constructed within the first floor of the Playhouse building, which was originally built in the 1920s and was donated to the town in 1999. The building underwent an extensive renovation from 2003-2006, which renovated the eastern half of the building into a gymnasium and community spaces that has been home to daycare programs, a senior nutrition program, town annex and a fitness center.

But more than half the building has sat empty, awaiting the aquatic center project and an eventual second phase that would create a new cultural center space on the second floor above the swimming facilities.

The foundation has not said what it expects the work to cost — as bidding for the actual work is still forthcoming — but Iudicone said in response to a question from The Press, that the foundation is confident it has the funding for the first phase of the new wing and will continue raising funds for the second phase to follow.

East Hampton Town has already pledged \$5 million toward the project and the foundation's prospectus for the project said that offering wellness programs for senior citizens and disabled children will make additional grant funding available.

To help the foundation run the new facilities, the group announced on Friday that it will partner with Imagine Swimming, a New York City-based company that teaches swimming lessons to more than 4,000 children every week and runs five swimming pool facilities in Manhattan and Brooklyn. One of its founders, Lars Merseburg, is a Montauk resident.

Merseburg told the Town Board on Tuesday that the Playhouse plans match perfectly with the programs his company runs in New York City, focusing on teaching swimming to 3- to 5-year-olds, but also reaching out to "the poles" of the population: from babies to senior citizens, who can both benefit greatly from access to supervised time in the water.

The number one cause of accidental deaths among children under the age of 5 is drowning, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Merseburg said, and is the second leading cause of death for those under 14 after motor vehicle crashes. He said that some health insurance plans might even cover swimming lessons because of the mortality statistics.

"With the growing Hispanic population, this is an at-risk population," Merseburg said. "There's a 90 percent chance that you will not learn how to swim if your parents do not know how to swim. We want to reverse that trend."

Iudicone called Montauk a "swimming pool desert" because of the lack of nearby public swimming facilities — the nearest being the YMCA in East Hampton Village. For a seaside community, that is a dangerous gap in services.

Since 2010, the number of families living in Montauk has increased 38 percent, and the number of households with children under 6 years old has quadrupled, a demographic study commissioned by the foundation to explore the need for the pool revealed. At the same time, the senior citizen population in the hamlet doubled, to more than 1,000 individuals and the Hispanic population increased by half.

Town officials applauded the milestone and looming realization of a decades-long community goal.

"I've been around long enough to remember when this was a dream being funded by bake sales and movie nights," Supervisor Peter Van Scoyoc said. "It's incredibly exciting for me that we're finally reaching the point where this is ready to go."

Councilwoman Kathee Burke-Gonzalez applauded the diligence of the foundation in doing the demographic and market analysis of the project before moving it forward.

Councilman David Lys said that expanding on the work of the Ryan family to "waterproof" the town through swimming instruction of youth was a critical need in the community.

"The numbers that Lars just mentioned are staggering," he said. "Knowing that we have 71 miles of coastline [in the town] ... it is very important to be able to teach the basic element of knowing how to swim."