

Pools in Reach at Last at Montauk Community Center

With the town taking the lead, a July start date is targeted



Sarah Iudicone of the Montauk Playhouse Community Center Foundation told the East Hampton Town Board that construction of the center's long-awaited aquatic center is set to begin in July.

Christopher Walsh

By Christopher Walsh

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A groundbreaking ceremony for a long-awaited aquatic center at the Montauk Playhouse is planned for July, Sarah Iudicone, the president of the Montauk Playhouse Community Center Foundation's board, told a delighted East Hampton Town Board on Tuesday.

At the town board's work session and with five other foundation board members in attendance, Ms. Iudicone said that the town's commitment of \$5 million, combined with money raised by the foundation and ongoing fund-raising, allows the hamlet's residents to realize the dream of "a pool to teach swim instruction and water safety."

The Playhouse, built in the 1920s by Carl Fisher, eventually fell into disrepair. By a half-century ago, it was characterized by aquatic themes of an altogether different kind: While showing films like "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea" and "The Day of the Dolphin," rain would fall through holes in the roof and onto patrons as umbrellas were hastily opened.

In 1999, after a developer's plans for the structure were opposed by the community, the property was donated to the town and the Playhouse Community Center Foundation was formed. Restoration commenced in 2003, and three years later the eastern half of the building was reopened as a community center with day care programs, a fitness center, a senior citizens nutrition program, a town clerk annex, and recreational programs.

But "the citizens of Montauk identified an additional community need all those years ago," Ms. Iudicone told the board. "For the last 24 years, hundreds of volunteers and thousands of donors have dedicated time and money to the Playhouse Foundation's effort to plan for, design, and build a community pool." More than 2,600 people have made donations, not including some 4,000 who attended more than 450 fund-raising events. Gifts have ranged from \$5 to the \$1 million given by an anonymous donor in January 2020.

The foundation engaged James Lima Planning + Development of Manhattan, which Ms. Iudicone said confirmed that "this is the right project, the community very much needs it, and it will succeed." Between 2010 and 2020, when the town's population grew by around one-third, in Montauk families with

children under 18 increased by 38 percent, the number of households with children under 6 grew fourfold, the 20-to-24 age group grew by 67 percent, and the 65-and-up demographic grew by 49 percent.

Yet Montauk is "a swimming pool desert," Ms. Iudicone said. Geographically isolated and surrounded by water, "it's important to provide swim instruction and services for aquatic and water safety within a reasonable distance."

Ms. Iudicone unveiled a blueprint for a first-floor aquatic center featuring a four-lane, 25-yard lap pool, and a second pool designated as a wellness and recreation pool. These will accommodate "wellness, fitness, and swim instruction," she said, including drowning prevention, lifeguard training and certifications, private coaching, lap swimming, youth and adult swimming, rehabilitation, and aquatic fitness and aerobics. The foundation has targeted a late-2024 or early-2025 opening.

Ms. Iudicone introduced Lars Merseburg of Imagine Swimming, a New York City learn-to-swim school that had input in the aquatic center's design and has submitted a proposal to the foundation's board to operate it. "It quickly became clear that it would be an excellent fit for the community," Mr. Merseburg, who lives in Montauk and Manhattan, told the board, "because we have been running swim schools in Manhattan and Brooklyn for 20 years." There, he said, children who were previously unable to access swimming pools are becoming "first-generation swimmers."

When parents don't know how to swim, the odds are great that their children won't learn either, he said. "We want to reverse that trend, and give access to everyone from babies to seniors. With our teaching philosophy, our teaching staff, our school's reputation, and also our client base that is in the city and out east, we feel we're the ideal operator to work in tandem with the Playhouse and build this program for decades to come." Imagine Swimming's core clientele is 3 to 5 years old, he said, "but we focus on the poles — seniors and babies — bringing all together in the swimming pool."

Two pools are "ideal for our programming needs," Mr. Merseburg said, telling the board that the town's schools would be able to offer swimming lessons at the aquatic center. Imagine Swimming allocates around half a million dollars per year "to offer free swim lessons to the community in Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan. We want to do the same here — rely on grants, but also, we have a partnership with the Hope Floats Foundation," which provides scholarships for swimming lessons for children from low-income households.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more children ages 1 to 4 die from drowning than from any other cause, and for children 5 to 14 it is the second leading cause of unintentional injury death, after motor vehicle crashes. This is especially true for children from underserved communities, Mr. Merseburg said.

"We're honored that we're considered" to operate the Playhouse's aquatic center, he said. "We're excited to start building."

Island Structures Engineering of West Islip, which worked on the Playhouse's initial renovation, serves as architect and engineer and will provide construction oversight, Ms. Iudicone told the board. The Playhouse Foundation will donate its set of construction documents to the town for use in the bidding process, she said.

The board will soon vote on a resolution to accept the foundation's plans, Councilwoman Kathee Burke-Gonzalez said, and the board will solicit bids for the project.

The foundation did not disclose a budget for the project, given the imminent bidding process, but Ms. Iudicone said after the meeting that that information will be released after the bidding process has concluded. The foundation has raised enough money to commence construction of the aquatic center, she said, "and will be continuing our fund-raising efforts throughout the construction process."

"I've been around long enough to remember when this was a dream that was funded by contributions from bake sales and movie nights," Supervisor Peter Van Scoyoc said. "It's incredibly exciting for me, and I know the board shares this excitement that we're finally reaching the point where we're ready to go. So thank you all for all of your work, your contribution of time, of money, and efforts to get us to this point."

"I think," he said, "there's been a collective sigh of relief that finally this is coming to pass."

With Reporting by Christine Sampson