

New Aquatic Center Build Underway

Playhouse still fundraising for unfinished space

BY CHRISTOPHER WALSH

Earth-moving equipment began excavation for the 25-yard, four-lane lap pool at the Montauk Playhouse Community Center on Monday, providing a first glimpse of what will be the storied structure's new aquatic center.

The long-planned completion of the unfinished half of the Playhouse, for which the Montauk Playhouse Community Center Foundation is still fundraising, will include both the first-floor aquatic center, which will also feature a second, 32-foot-by-33-foot shallow pool for instruction, recreation and physical therapy; and a second-floor, multi-use cultural arts center. The project remains on track for a summer 2025 completion, officials said on Monday.

The Playhouse was abuzz on Monday, construction well underway in multiple areas, workers creating a modern facility within the 1929 Tudor Revival-style building and what Sarah Ludicone, the Playhouse Foundation's president, called Montauk's new "third place" at an August 2023 groundbreaking ceremony.

Separate from home and workplace, third places "play an important part in our identity," she said at the time. "They allow us to open ourselves up, learn more about the people around us, and deepen our civic engagement."

The cultural center is to be a versatile, 3,805-square-foot space for performances, lectures, classes, conferences and meetings. It will be able to accommodate up to 534 standing-room guests and 252 for theatrical performances.

With two partition walls, it will allow up to three discrete event spaces. Cultural performances and programming as well as classes, meetings, lectures and conferences are envisioned.

The second floor also will include a warming kitchen, two lounge areas and two glass-enclosed meeting rooms.

"The goal," said Scott DiBerardino of Island Structures Engi-

neering, the project manager, "was to try and make this building as versatile as possible to as many groups simultaneously as we possibly could."

"We know there's no space like this in Montauk," Ludicone said.

Along with the 25-yard lap pool — for water safety education, instructional programming, training, recreation and lifeguard and Red Cross certification — and the shallow pool, both ADA-accessible, the aquatic center will include family changing rooms, men's and women's locker rooms, viewing areas, a lounge area, a lobby and an office.

The Playhouse was originally constructed by Carl Fisher as a 12-court tennis arena, a component in his plan to make Montauk the "Miami Beach of the North." It operated through the 1930s and was leased to the U.S. Navy during World War II. It was later used as an indoor arena for training quarter horses and, briefly, for summer stock theater. From 1960 into the 1970s, it was seasonally operated as a movie theater, after which it was abandoned for many years and fell into disrepair.

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

Through fundraising and private donations, the Playhouse Foundation raised \$8.25 million toward the project's cost, Supervisor Kathee Burke-Gonzalez said early this year. The town is providing \$5.5 million as well as a water quality grant of \$114,000 for a low-nitrogen septic system.

On a visit to the South Fork



The Montauk Playhouse Community Center's second-floor cultural center is under construction.

CHRISTOPHER WALSH



A rendering of the new cultural center, which can be partitioned to create up to three discrete spaces.

year ago, State Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie, accompanied by Assemblyman Fred W. Thiele Jr., announced a \$1.75 million state award for the center.

While the construction element of the project is fully funded, "we are still fundraising" for furnishings and components like a movable stage and equipment like stage lighting and audio/video

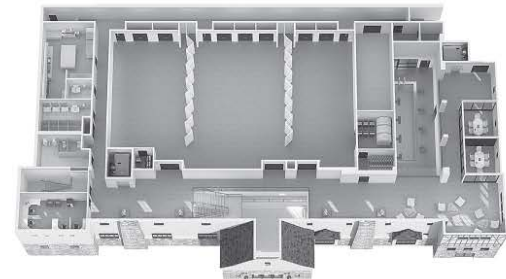
equipment, Ludicone said. "We want to be able to do that as soon as this is done.

"It's important for the community to know that this is their space," she said, "and I really want them to be excited and feel like it belongs to them, and to support it. It's going to require community support to keep it sustainable. That's the goal."



A rendering of the new aquatic center.

MONTAUK PLAYHOUSE COMMUNITY CENTER FOUNDATION PHOTOS



A birds-eye view of the Montauk Playhouse Community Center's second-floor cultural center.