

Hochul Hails a Remade Playhouse *Spirits and praise were high at aquatic and cultural centers' ceremony*



Gov. Kathy Hochul was surrounded by Montauk residents including Joan Lycke (seated) and East Hampton Town and New York State officials past and present at the Montauk Playhouse Community Center on Friday. *Durell Godfrey*

By Christopher Walsh

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Two years after a groundbreaking for the Montauk Playhouse Community Center's new aquatic and cultural centers, Gov. Kathy Hochul led a jubilant gathering including East Hampton Town and New York State officials past and present in a ceremonial ribbon-cutting for the expansive new facilities on Friday.

Nearly 100 years after Carl Fisher constructed the Playhouse as a glass-roof, 12-court tennis arena, the largest indoor tennis complex in the country at the time, the ribbon was cut on the \$13.9 million project that has transformed the grand 1929 structure with the addition of a first-floor aquatic center featuring a four-lane lap pool and a shallow pool for instruction, recreation, and physical therapy, and a second-floor multipurpose cultural center intended to host uses for youth, families, senior citizens, businesses, and arts and cultural organizations.

It was at the Aug. 2, 2023, groundbreaking that Sarah Iudicone, then the president of the Montauk Playhouse Community Center Foundation, spoke of the concept of "third places," home being one's first place and a work site or school being the second. "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 aquatic center is projected to open in the autumn following the completion of punch-list items and operational and staffing preparations by Imagine Swimming, a New York City learn-to-swim school that had input in the aquatic center's design. Imagine Swimming's Lars Merseburg is a resident of Montauk and Manhattan.

The Playhouse Foundation is now raising additional money for audio-visual equipment and initial staffing for the cultural center, with the goal to open it by year's end.

"If this is the friendliest place in the entire State of New York, I don't think I'm ever leaving," a smiling Governor Hochul said on Friday. She thanked Jennifer Carney Iacono, president of the foundation's board, "for leading this incredible place, it's extraordinary." Maureen Cahill, also of the foundation's board, "tells me it's 23 years in the making to have that swimming pool," the governor said. "It's visionaries like those and many of the leaders that we have here today that really are profoundly changing people's lives."

Initially, the plan was to construct the 12,127-square-foot aquatic center first while fund-raising for the 11,663-square-foot cultural center continued. But the foundation raised more than \$8 million toward the project's cost, and the town provided \$5.5 million as well as a water quality grant of \$114,000 for a low-nitrogen septic system. During an October 2023 visit to the South Fork, State Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie, accompanied by then-Assemblyman Fred W. Thiele Jr., announced a \$1.75 million state award for the community center. Owing to the sum raised, an expected two-phase project instead happened simultaneously.

The governor recognized Mr. Thiele, who was in attendance, along with his successor, Assemblyman Tommy John Schiavoni, who also attended, Suffolk County Legislator Ann Welker, Supervisor Kathee Burke-Gonzalez, and her predecessor, Peter Van Scoyoc. Former supervisor Larry Cantwell also attended the ribbon-cutting.

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She also acknowledged Ms. Burke-Gonzalez's colleagues on the town board because "I'm a former town board member," she said, "and we never get recognized."

Governor Hochul noted that, as governor of New York, Franklin Roosevelt, who had polio, had an indoor swimming pool constructed within a former greenhouse at the State Executive Mansion in Albany and used it for hydrotherapy. "Every day he would do this to relax his muscles," she said. "So I know that water's very therapeutic, whether it's in a pool or just this magnificent community where you get to look at the water anytime you want. This is God's gift to the world, Montauk, and the eastern part of our beautiful Long Island."

"Places like this for families to feel at home, connected, pass on traditions to each other, and for seniors to interact with children and families, it's just really special to me as New York's first mom-governor," she said. "It's all about the kids and families being able to be connected."

"Governor," Ms. Burke-Gonzalez said, "your continued presence here on the East End means so much to us. Your leadership and investment in projects that strengthen our town, protect our environment, and support working families are deeply felt and appreciated. Your support helped bring this vision to life and we're so grateful."

"To the Montauk Playhouse Community Center Foundation — Jennifer, the board, every volunteer, every donor past and present — thank you," she said. "This day belongs to all of you. You gave your heart, your energy, your support to this project and you never gave up. What surrounds us today is the result of years of collaboration . . . people who believe in each other and in the future of Montauk. It reflects the values we share and the understanding that lasting progress comes from working side by side."

In the decades following its opening, the Playhouse fell into disrepair. 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 started 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.

Completing this new phase of its resurrection "is in many ways the very definition of the phrase 'it takes a community,'" Ms. Iacono said. "Montauk is a community of heart, grit, creativity, generosity, and independence. We are bound together by a shared love and a deep respect for our sunny land and surrounding waters. This is a place that's dynamic, diverse, environmentally conscious, at times contentious, but always caring. We're proud of our storied history, and just as proud to be building our future shaped by a vision, perseverance, and the collective spirit that defines this place."

"As someone who doesn't get here nearly as often as I would like to someday, I just hope you know you have something really special here," the governor said in concluding her remarks.

"It's the natural wonder here, the beauty, God's gift of nature, but also a tight-knit community that cares about each other. Never take that for granted."