

Egyptian Theatre set to undergo \$4.5 million renovation project

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DeKALB – Installing air conditioning in the 90-year-old Egyptian Theatre is not just about comfort, Executive Director Alex Nerad said. It’s about maintaining an economic engine, sustainably, for the DeKalb region and beyond.

“Whether you look at economic, hotel or restaurant impact, we need the Egyptian year-round,” Nerad said, standing in the 30,000-square-foot theater’s iconic auditorium, adorned with ornamental paintings and decor, the product of an “Egypt-mania” that swept the country in the 1920s.

On Dec. 18, the DeKalb City Council earmarked \$2.5 million in surplus funds from the tax increment financing district known as TIF 2. The funds will be finalized in the coming weeks, but the theater staff already is moving forward with plans for a \$4.5 million project to install a heating, ventilation and air-conditioning system, expand the bathroom facilities and a number of other repairs and upgrades.



Paul Borek, executive director of the DeKalb County Economic Development Corp., was among 35 individuals representing businesses or organizations who wrote letters of support for the Egyptian project before the vote on TIF funding.

“The [theater] reports that it now serves 40,000 patrons that contribute over \$2 million each year to the local economy,” Borek said [in his letter](#). “Downtown restaurants attest to the [theater’s] positive impact on traffic and revenue, while lamenting the lack of traffic during the summer. With year-round operation, it is estimated that the [theater] would serve 54,000 patrons contributing over \$3 million in annual economic impact.”

Other notable letters of support came from the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce, John Pappas of Pappas Development, Bob and Beth Fowler of the Beth Fowler School of Dance, the DeKalb County Community Foundation, Arts Alliance Illinois, Dimensions Dance Academy, the DeKalb County Conventions and Visitors Bureau, the Theatre Historical Society of America, the DeKalb Public Library, Northern Illinois University and restaurants such as Hillside Restaurant at 121 N. Second St., Tapa La Luna at 226 Lincoln Highway and Fatty’s Pub & Grill at 1312 W. Lincoln Highway.

Engineering will begin in June, and theater officials hope to begin their summer programming in 2020.

The air conditioning has been designed to protect the historical integrity of the building and will be installed on the roof. The energy-efficient unit – which Nerad said “is the size of a school bus” – will require some infrastructure redesign so the roof can support the weight. Although the engineering team will be able to use the existing ductwork for the HVAC system, new and more efficient ductwork will be installed throughout the building.

The building’s south side on Palmer Court will see a 4,200-square-foot, two-story addition to support the HVAC units, help expand the bathrooms on the second floor, and allow for second-floor concessions that will include an in-house liquor license upgrade. Estimated revenue from the concessions is \$100,000 annually.

The first-floor women’s bathrooms will go from three stalls to 16 stalls. The mezzanine women’s bathrooms will go from two to six stalls. Additionally, the building will be renovated to conform to the standards set by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

“Of any project recently that has the ability to have a broad impact throughout the county and region, the Egyptian has a proven record of that,” Nerad said.

In fact, the Egyptian Theatre has received so much community support for this project that Nerad said the remaining \$2 million needed to cover project costs already is on its way to being funded. About \$1 million has been contributed so far by private donors, including an undisclosed amount by Hollywood actor and DeKalb native Richard Jenkins, Nerad said.

Steve and TJ Irving of Arrowhead Lane in DeKalb also made “a substantial donation,” as indicated [in their letter of support to the city](#).

“Everybody has a connection to the Egyptian,” Nerad said. “Whether it’s your first date, first kiss, if you get engaged here, it’s 90 years of history.”

Nerad said the theater also is exploring state and historic preservation grants.

“It’s time to really reinvigorate and appreciate our local assets,” Nerad said.