

COMMUNITY

The 'beach theater,' reborn

Delayed funding flows again for Tybee Theater

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Layoffs. Budget cuts. Hiring freezes.

None of these are pleasant to any business, but they're especially disheartening to a nonprofit organization. Donors have less to give, memberships slacken and already tiny budgets are even more scrutinized.

Even government grants can dry up, as happened recently in Georgia. In fact, the Tybee Post Theater had received a previous grant but until recently the funds were still on hold.

Built in 1930 as part of the Fort Screven complex, the Tybee Post Theater became known as the "beach" theater after the decommissioning of the fort in 1945. It finally closed in 1962.

The Friends of Tybee Theater (FoTT) acquired the title in 2006 after Tybee Historical Society purchased the building in 2001 to save it from demolition. Currently, the brick building is a shell, with a recently repaired roof.

The Historic Preservation Division (HPD) of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources was able to disperse funds generated from their sales of the historic preservation license plate. Carole Moore, the grants coordinator of HPD says, "We at HPD are very grateful to see the license plate money

finally put into action on a preservation project. Twenty-two dollars out of the \$15 used to purchase the license plate goes into the fund."

The project of the Tybee Post Theater is considered "top scoring" among the 37 grant requests received by the HPD. Pamela Lappin, FoTT Board President, is thrilled to be the first to receive funds from the license plate.

"It's nice to be recognized by the state and historic preservation that this is important," she says. "It's an economic project. With the theater open, Tybee residents can stay on the island, and tourists can come over to see what's playing."

Gallen Chambers, Executive Director of Tybee Historical Society, and self-described pro-bono preservation consultant, assisted FoTT in writing the grant and agrees the economic argument is the strongest one. He noticed a flurry of excitement when the roof was repaired, but that enthusiasm has slowed.

By devoting grant funds to the restoration of the doors and windows on the front, Chambers is sure things will pick up again. "Once you see the windows and doors done, it will really enhance



Left, celebrating the additional funding; right, a rendering of the completed Theater

the aesthetic value, and it acts as leverage for funding opportunities. It's small but significant in terms of a dramatic change in the exterior."

Chambers also worked with SCAD classes to research the original historical renderings. All this research has been turned over to architect Neil Dawson, who will head up the project.

"This should be pretty straightforward," Dawson says. "The basic design of the building hasn't changed and there is plenty of documentation. We even have the original drawing from the War Department, as well as postcards and monographs."

Although a contractor has not yet been hired, Dawson thinks they will probably have custom doors made, and the windows will be true divided light.

"You want to save a building that makes you feel like what you do is important. And it is fun to take my family later so they can see what I do."

The second phase of the theater's restoration has not yet been fully funded and does not have a firm timetable, but will include what is called "basic life safety requirements" — permanent power, basic lighting, fire alarm sys-

tems, emergency exits, and railings — as well as the tiered platforms on the raised floor that will allow for temporary, moveable seating.

This will allow them to get a permit for occupancy, and the theater can be open for use, even if all the finishing touches are not done. They hope to present concerts and films as well as attracting use from local theater companies and wedding planners.

In the meantime, FoTT hosts some programming at other locations, like the popular "drive-in" movies at the North Beach parking lot and concerts on the Lighthouse lawn.

Keeping up the momentum may not always be easy, but it will be worth it. "It's a long-term project," Dawson says, "but I get a rush out of it." □

Friends of Tybee Theater Annual Membership Meeting

When & Where: Thu., Feb. 19, 7 p.m. at the American Legion, 54 Veterans Dr., Tybee Is. Neil Dawson will present his plans for front facade restoration and FoTT will announce the schedule for next season.

Info: www.tybeeposttheater.org

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