

# CPA funds are key to playhouse renovation

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**ORLEANS** - Like a skeleton key opens many doors, the \$75,000 Community Preservation Act grant to the Academy of Performing Arts playhouse in Orleans is unlocking a host of projects.

The money is being used to design and install a new sprinkler system in the historic former town hall, which was built in 1873.

"We're very excited about this," said Dick Hatch, an academy trustee and its building committee chairman. "I've been involved with the theater for 15 years, and we've been waiting for a time when we can do something like this."

Trustees chairwoman Marcia Galazzi said getting the sprinklers is making everyone feel like children on Christmas morning. She was at the May 8 Town Meeting when the spending was approved as part of the CPA budget - Santa coming down the chimney, perhaps.

"I was struck dumb," she said of the vote. "It was unanimous approval, and I just couldn't believe it."

In particular, Galazzi said she is excited by the support the academy is getting from the town. Not only did residents vote for the grant at Town Meeting, Police Chief Jeffrey Roy, Fire Chief Steven Edwards, Fire Capt. William Quinn Jr. and James Hadley of the historical commission wrote letters supporting the grant.

"It's more than wild-eyed theater dreamers," she said.

After installing the sprinklers, one of the first projects planned is an addition that is being called "the West Wing." It will provide emergency egress from the theater and handicapped access, including toilets for the handicapped and an elevator to the theater. Plans call for its position to be where it is least visible from the road.

"You will hardly see it," Hatch said.

A bonus, according to Artistic Director Peter Earle, is that building the West Wing will allow the iron fire escape to be removed.

"It's not the best of all worlds, and it's ugly as hell," he said. "It's the first thing you see when you drive up here."

Another project near the top of the agenda will be excavating the basement, including putting in a new foundation and installing steel beams and posts. Once the basement is done, plans call for it to include a rehearsal area, storage and workshop space.

"Right now, it's crawl space underneath," said Hatch. "That will stabilize the whole structure and give us 2,400 feet of storage, which we desperately need."

New air conditioning and heating systems in the theater are also part of the plan.

"If you were to ask the average theater-goer what they would do first, they would say air conditioning," Galazzi said. "We do too, but we have to preserve the building."

Hatch is working on the plans with architect Paul Minor, as they did to save the Concord Players theater 30 years ago. According to Hatch, the Concord town manager said the building would be torn down before a nonprofit group took over renovation.

"It also didn't have a sprinkler system and was considered a hazard," he said.

"(Now) it's one of the most gorgeous theaters around, and scheduled and used every day all year-round."

Earle's model is the Goodspeed Opera House in East Haddam, Conn., which was built in 1876 before being turned into a storage depot for the state's highway department. It was restored in 1959 and reopened as an opera house four years later.

"It's an absolute showplace," he said. "It's absolutely lovely."

All this work is going to take money, however, and lots more than the \$75,000 from the CPA. Earle described the cost as "somewhere between 'ouch' and 'boing,'" but the early guesses are that the basement, heating and air conditioning system and elevator will each cost about the same as the sprinklers.

Although the grant only covers a fraction of the cost, it can be used as leverage to get more money, as other groups may be more inclined to make donations if they know the theater is protected.

Hatch specifically recalled one time when the lack of a sprinkler cost the theater a donation.

"They said they didn't want to put money in it because it didn't have a sprinkler system," he said.

And the theater is not done with the community preservation committee, as its projects are eligible for funding under historic preservation. The committee has approximately \$495,000 to potentially spend at a fall Town Meeting and is accepting applications until July 31.

"We are expecting to submit additional requests to them," Hatch said.