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Fundraising team picked for RenSquare theater

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Staff writer

Some of Rochester's biggest names in business will help raise \$15.5 million for a theater at Renaissance Square while a new effort is under way to hire unprecedented levels of minority construction workers.

The downtown project appeared to move forward Thursday with the announcement of a fundraising team. Renaissance Square planners need between \$45 million and \$63 million to fund a 2,800-seat theater.

They also need the support of a skeptical City Council if the project is to move forward, and council members have said they want the project to employ city residents. On Thursday, Ken Warner, executive director of Unions and Businesses United in Construction and a fundraiser, said that a plan is in the works for 25 percent of the construction work force to be members of minority groups.

Councilman John Lightfoot said Thursday that he welcomed the new hiring provision but that he was pushing a requirement that 30 percent of the work force be city residents both during and after construction. This would include workers for the all three of the project's components — a downtown campus for Monroe Community College, a bus station and the theater. The campus and bus station are fully funded.

Lightfoot is investigating whether a residency requirement is legal.

"I don't see how this project can help my community unless they hire from us," Lightfoot said.

Although Warner and County Executive Maggie Brooks have discussed the plan, nothing is final, said Noah Lebowitz, Brooks' spokesman.

The theater fundraising team would include Paychex CEO Jonathan Judge, M&T Bank Regional President Daniel Burns, Constellation Brands Chairman Richard Sands and eight others, according to Tom Bonadio, CEO of the Bonadio Group and chairman of the effort.

Some members said they don't know yet whether the money is out there.

"I came to the conclusion that if you don't try, you're throwing in the towel," said Sandy Parker, CEO of the Rochester Business Alliance, one of the fundraisers.

M&T Bank, the major sponsor for the Rochester Broadway Theatre League, would like to see a downtown theater. "We've got to make every effort possible to raise the private funds necessary to fill the gap," Burns said.

One of the area's top philanthropy experts was impressed with Bonadio's list, saying it lends clout to the project.

"It helps make the project more ours, more the community's," said Jennifer Leonard, president of the Rochester Area Community Foundation, who is not on the team.

Renaissance Square is a \$230 million project planned for the northwest corner of East Main Street and North Clinton Avenue.

No one has been asked for money yet, Bonadio said. He's waiting to see whether City Council approves the project in July. If it does, formal requests for funding won't be made until demolition begins in October.

The theater's total cost is \$83 million, and nearly \$20 million in public funds have been raised. The status of an additional \$18 million state Senate grant is questionable. In addition to the private donations, at least \$30 million would be sought from the state and other funders.

A new 2,800-seat theater would replace the 2,400-seat Auditorium Theatre, home to RBTL. The Auditorium Theatre won't accommodate bigger Broadway shows and will limit the quality of the productions that can be brought to Rochester, said Arnold Rothschild, RBTL chairman.

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Additional Facts

Fundraising team

Tom Bonadio, chairman of the fundraising team, announced these members:

- Maggie Brooks, county executive.
- Dan Burns, regional president, M&T Bank.
- Brian Hickey, executive vice president, M&T Bank.
- Robert Hurlbut, Jr., president, ROHM Services Corp.
- Howie Jacobson, managing partner, Dixon Schwabl Advertising.
- Jonathan Judge, president and CEO, Paychex.
- Richard Kaplan, president and CEO, Pictometry International Corp.
- Sandra Parker, president and CEO, Rochester Business Alliance.
- Arnold Rothschild, chairman, Rochester Broadway Theatre League.
- Richard Sands, chairman, Constellation Brands, Inc.
- Ken Warner, executive director, UNICON.