

# Levoy has support of thousands

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MILLVILLE — The City Commission received some extra incentive at Tuesday's meeting to follow through with its commitment to a \$2.95 million Urban Enterprise Zone grant for the renovations to the Levoy Theatre.

Following a presentation from Levoy Theatre Preservation Society board members, the group gave commissioners petitions with signatures of thousands of people who support the renovation project. The hundreds of sheets of paper were placed on City Clerk Lew Thompson's desk.

Levoy board member Phil Van Embden called the move "the Miracle on High Street," a reference to the movie "Miracle on 34th Street."

On Tuesday, the City Commission stated its intent to approve the \$2.95 million UEZ grant at next month's meeting. The move is meant to help the Levoy board secure money from its other sources.

"It's like a domino," said board chair Lauren Van Embden. "Once one commits, then everything else falls into place."

## AT A GLANCE

Money to pay for the renovations to the Levoy Theatre is expected to come from the following sources:

■ Urban Enterprise Zone grant: \$2.95 million

■ State tax credits: \$2.1 million

Money the city will try to secure from outside sources:

■ \$1 million (Still in discussion)

■ NJ Historical Trust grant: \$750,000

■ Money from private sources, which could include selling the naming rights to the theatre's auditorium.

\$750,000 to \$1 million

None of the money has been approved. The City Commission has stated its intent to approve the UEZ grant at next month's meeting. The theatre's board does not want to secure loans for the project.

The theater could open in December 2009. Board members anticipate 223 events and 80,000 visitors the first year. The board's ultimate goal of 120,000 visitors per year could begin by the third year.

Phil Van Embden, who said the city's commitment was the key to securing the money for the proj-

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## Levoy

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ect, said the board is being conservative with their numbers.

"It's our intention to make the project succeed," he said. "We don't want to put unrealistic expectations out there."

According to a national study of nonprofit theaters not based in New York City and Los Angeles, conducted by Ameri-

cans for the Arts, the average person spends \$27.79 per trip to a theater, not including ticket prices, in a demographic tier similar to this area, Lauren Van Embden said.

Sixty-one percent of theatergoers were local and 39 percent were from

outside the immediate area, according to the study. The local residents spent an average of \$19.53 per trip, and non-local residents spent an average of \$40.19 per trip, the study

states.

Mayor James Quinn said the theater would be a gem for the city's downtown.

"I feel it's a great thing for our city," he said.



Staff photo/Cody Gleason  
Jim Cook of the Off Broad Street Players drops stacks of petitions on City Clerk Administrator Lew Thompson's desk during a Millville City Commission meeting Tuesday night.

**WEDNESDAY**  
**DECEMBER 17, 2008**

# The Press

OF ATLANTIC CITY

Vol. MMVIII, No. 352, ©2008 South Jersey Publishing Co.

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## Millville commits UEZ millions to Levoy restoration

■ Officials say the pledge of as much as \$2.95 million will ensure an application for a state Historic Trust grant will receive serious consideration.

By **JOHN MARTINS**  
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**MILLVILLE** — City commissioners Tuesday publicly pledged their support — both moral and financial — to restoring this city's historic yet long-shuttered Levoy Theatre.

By a unanimous vote, Millville's five commissioners approved sending a letter indicating the city's commitment to providing as much as \$2.95 million in Urban Enterprise Zone funds to the restoration project. A resolution formalizing the commitment is slated to be introduced in January.

According to members of the Levoy Theatre Preservation Society, or LTPS, which is managing the planned \$7.8 million renovation, the city's gesture of support was needed to ensure that an application to the New Jersey Historic Trust for another

\$750,000 grant would receive serious consideration.

With the city's support, the group also is expecting to receive \$2.1 million in tax-credit funding and as much as \$1 million from additional grant sources.

"These grants are very competitive," said Lauren Van Embden, a Millville attorney who serves as the LTPS board chairwoman. "With this letter, it makes it look like we have \$6.5 million."

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## Millville

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Van Embden also said the commissioners' letter of support will be included with the NJHT application, which will be processed in January. A final decision from the Historic Trust is expected in February.

Dozens of Millville residents appeared at Tuesday's commission meeting to voice their support for the project. Many also heralded the restoration as a critical component to the city's ongoing downtown revitalization efforts.

"The success of the downtown arts district is tied to the fate of the Levoy Theatre," said Jeff Page, a downtown merchant who was one of the preservation society's founding members.

Many commissioners agreed, adding that they believe the foot traffic the restored theater will bring will help make the downtown arts district a thriving marketplace.

"Every plan we've had comes back as saying the Levoy Theatre is the way to get feet on the street," Commissioner Tim Shannon said. "This is a vital, vital piece for our downtown and its survival."

Commissioner Dave Vanaman, however, expressed initial reservations about the proportion of available UEZ money the city would spend on the project.

He said the \$2.95 million amounted to a sizable share of the \$7.2 million currently available in the city's UEZ account.

"That's an awful big number," Vanaman said. "My main concern is cutting so deeply into the funding."

Millville Economic Director Don Ayres, however, said that continuing payments on UEZ loans would replenish the money that is spent on the Levoy Theatre project. He also

said any money that would be drawn down would have to be approved with accompanying invoices and other documentation, and that it would not all be spent at once.

After discussing those concerns, Vanaman decided to throw his support behind the project.

"Basically, I do believe in the project, and I believe in the people doing the project," Vanaman said, to a round of applause. "If this group can't get it done, then tear it down. I think they're going to get it done."

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# THE NEWS

of Cumberland County

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2008

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## Levoy: Miracle on High St.

By JASON LADAY  
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MILLVILLE — Call it the miracle on High Street.

Everyone else did.

Comparisons with a certain 1940s cinema standard were unavoidable Tuesday, when assistants from the Levoy Theater Preservation Society stacked a pile of petitions in front of city clerk Lewis Thompson at the commission meeting.

There were more than 3,500 petitions in all, and they obscured the clerk's face as he smiled and asked for a box to haul them out.

There were 419 petitions from Vineland beseeching the city to help restore the High Street theater.

There were more than 460 from Bridgeton.

About 210 from the county townships and more than 1,000 from Millville.

They sent petitions from New York, Delaware, the Philadelphia region and Camden, Atlantic and Gloucester counties.

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## Levoy

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And if they were all present at Tuesday's commission meeting, they would have cheered along with city businesses owners and residents as they applauded the city's decision to commit to applying for \$2.95 million in Urban Enterprise Zone funds toward restoring the theater.

"I think this is a great investment in downtown Millville," said Mayor Jim Quinn. "I think it's clear that the key to the downtown area is the Levoy Theater — it would act as the arts district's anchor."

The commission unanimously approved a letter of support Tuesday, recommending the city's endorsement of the LTPS' application to the New Jersey Historic Trust for a \$750,000 grant. In addition, the commission indicated a commitment to apply for \$2,950,000 in UEZ funds for the theater.

The commission will vote on the UEZ application at its first meeting of the new year, on Jan. 6.

There was some initial hesi-

tation on the part of Commissioner Dave Vanaman, when he openly worried how the \$2.95 million would "cut so deeply into our (UEZ) funding — slightly less than half the city's current UEZ balance, in fact.

However, he eventually voted in favor of the motion, after his fellow commissioners stated it was "now or never."

"We can't have it go like this another 10 years," asserted Commissioner Joe Derella. "This needs to happen in 12 to 13 months, or it becomes an eyesore and would have to be torn down."

Vanaman, in response, stated he believed that if anyone is going to bring back the Levoy, it's the people at the preservation society.

"I do believe in the people and the project," he said. "I think they're the ones that are going to get it done."

"If they can't do it, then tear it down."

When the \$7.8 million project to restore the downtown icon is completed, organizers

promise up to 80,000 patrons in the first year.

"To sum it up, 46 percent of the customers at the Levoy theater will be from outside the city, and they will spend twice as much here as locals," said preservation society member Lauren Van Embden, citing a multi-year study on the projected impact the theater would have on Millville.

"About 40 percent of that money spent will be spent on food and retail," she added.

Aside from the city's endorsement of the UEZ and state historical trust funds, members at the LTPS are drawing capital from \$2.1 to \$2.4 million in new market tax credits and — the final piece of the puzzle — \$1 million that the society hopes to raise itself.

The commission hinted to waiting until the LTPS manages to collect the \$1 million before releasing the UEZ funds.

"That could be a condition that other monies be brought in before this UEZ money is kicked in," said Millville Eco-

nomic Development Director Don Ayres.

To help celebrate the city's commitment, High Street business owners and other residents packed the commission hall, with many giving testimonials to how much the theater means to them.

"In difficult times, people turn to recreation, to escape hard times," said Jane Gelatto, president of Citizens United to Protect the Maurice River and Its Tributaries. I just want to thank the city commission for all its done for the site of my first kiss."

Owners of such High Street businesses as the Oar House Irish Pub, New Revelations Records and Regional Music were in attendance, as well as Don Fauerbach, from the New Jersey Motorsports Park.

"There's the problem with the perception of crime, and you fix that with either more police or brighter lights," said Herb Roselle, owner of Regional Music. "And I can't think of a brighter light than the Levoy Theater."