

Orpheum, Marconi Score Big State Grants

by Tim Wood CHATHAM --- The Chatham Orpheum Theater and the Chatham Marconi Maritime Center received financial boosts Tuesday when both were awarded Massachusetts Cultural Facilities grants. The drive to restore the historic Orpheum Theater on Main Street received \$250,000, the highest amount allowed under the Massachusetts Cultural Council grant program and the single highest grant the popular project has received to date. The Marconi Center project to renovate the Hotel building on the campus of the former wireless receiving station received \$129,525. Officials from both non-profit organizations were elated at the news. "This is a feather in our cap," said Marconi Center President Charles Bartlett. "We're getting recognized on the state level as an institution that can bring benefit to the town and the state. We're so pleased." "It's just fabulous," said Orpheum President Naomi Turner. "We did our homework, and really did it right."

The Orpheum has raised more than \$3.3 million in the 18 months since forming to purchase the former CVS, which operated as a movie theater from 1916 to the late 1980s. More than \$2.6 million of that came from direct donations from area residents, businesses and foundations. The ongoing renovation project also received a \$462,000 community preservation grant from the town, \$80,000 from the Dreyfus Foundation and \$25,000 from the Prospect Hill Foundation.

"This outpouring of good will and tremendous financial support is a vivid demonstration of the local enthusiasm and popularity of this project," Turner said. The group also has a \$750,000 construction loan, and she pointed out that another \$500,000 is needed to retire the loan and fund operations. Fund raising continues with a benefit at the Wequassett Inn July 21 and a new campaign dubbed "TakeYour Seat." Donors who contribute \$2,500 will be entitled to a special plate inscribed with their name, family name or name of a loved and mounted on one of the 192 seats in the theater. Forty seats have been reserved to date.

A tour of the theater last week showed final touches being placed on sheet rock in the two theaters, one of which will hold 162 seats and show first-run films, while the second will have 35 seats and show independent and documentary movies. Organizers are still planning a mid-July "soft opening," showing a sure to be popular repertoire of Steven Spielberg films, including, appropriately, "Jaws." An official grand opening is slated for August.

Turner credited Orpheum interim manager Timothy Roper and board member Patricia Ares with doing the hard work to put together the Cultural Facilities grant. She also cited Arts Foundation of Cape Cod Director Kevin Howard, Rep. Sarah Peake, D-Provincetown, and Senator Dan Wolf, D-Harwich, with helping the project through the application process.

“We were told we absolutely fit the bill on this, but it’s unusual for the cultural council to give this kind of money to something that’s a start up, with no history,” Turner said.

The Marconi Center has secured the \$500,000-plus needed to renovate the interior of the Hotel building, Bartlett said, but is continuing to raise funds to support its education and outreach programs, which focus on communications and science, technology, engineering and math education.

The Center, which runs a museum dedicated to wireless communications in the former operations building on the townowned site overlooking Ryder’s Cove, is renovating the first floor of the Hotel, also known as the Nautilus. Like the rest of the structures on the campus, it was built in 1914 by the Marconi Radio Company and served as one of the chief ship-to-shore radio stations on the east coast for decades. The station shut down in the 1990s and the buildings are now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Center applied for the grant twice in the past. Last year, the organization had not negotiated a lease with the town, Bartlett said, and did not have permission for the project from regulatory boards. With all that in place, Peake helped set up a conference call with grant administrators to help improve their proposal. “That was a big help for us,” he said.

The funds are targeted for the renovation, which involves converting the first floor of the building into meeting, education and office space. “They’re working away,” Bartlett said of construction progress. Projections call for the work to be completed by September, just in time for school activities that are now being planned. “We can think more specifically about them now that we have secured this funding,” he said.

The awards were among \$5.2 million in grants to support new capital projects for nonprofit arts and cultural organizations across the state, the Patrick administration announced Monday. The program is “highly competitive,” Peake said in a telephone interview Tuesday. “Only a small percentage of those who apply get any money at all. So this is a real feather n the cap of the board of both of these organizations. It’s something Chatham should be clicking its heels over.” The grants also recognize the strong community support shown for both projects, she added.

As former chairman of the legislature’s joint committee on tourism, arts, and cultural development, Peake said she’s seen first hand how cultural facilities grants helped serve as an economic spark for communities. “There’s just this beautiful economic effect that happens,” she said.