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Eugene O'Neill Theater Center to receive \$3 million state grant

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A \$3 million state grant would mean that the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford could begin a major expansion that would accommodate the establishment of a new musical theater program for undergraduates.

Gov. Dannel P. Malloy announced Monday that the state would give the O'Neill a grant as part of a Special Act the legislature passed during its recent session.

State Sen. Andrea L. Stillman, D-Waterford, is quoted in the governor's press release as saying, "I'm grateful to Governor Malloy for including this item on next week's bond commission agenda and hope the other bond commission members will consider it favorably."

O'Neill officials first started discussing an expansion six years ago and have now secured all the necessary municipal permits and approvals.

The focus of the project is the O'Neill's founding of its National Music Theater Institute (NMTI). It will be a musical theater version of the center's National Theater Institute (NTI), which focuses on drama and can handle 30 undergraduates each session.

The NMTI will be a one-semester, intensive boot camp in musical theater training — the only program of its kind in the world, said O'Neill Executive Director Preston Whiteway. Students will not only learn to be better singers and dancers, but they will also learn to compose, choreograph, direct and design for musical theater, he said.

The state grant would help with the first part of the center's two-phase expansion.

Phase one will include building seven new dormitory cottages with living space for 65 people, as well as constructing a laundry building and a new rehearsal hall. In addition, the existing Production Cottage will be transformed into a rehearsal space.

The anticipated cost of phase one is \$7.8 million, which includes money already spent on architectural plans. The O'Neill plans to raise about \$4.82 million through private donations and pledges for that first phase and had, in fact, raised \$3.095 million by March of this year.

The exact price for phase two hasn't been finalized but is expected to be around \$8 million to \$9 million. Phase two will feature a new proscenium stage theater and a dining hall and kitchen. The current dining area will become office space. The second phase also aims for "significant endowment growth."

"It's a transformational moment for the O'Neill unlike any since its inception in 1964," Whiteway said. "This is going to catapult it into a new league, which is exciting."

Once the state grant is approved, the O'Neill can go out to bid.

The goal is to finish phase one and enroll the first class of NMTI students in the fall of 2014.

Whiteway said, "What's wonderful about this is the O'Neill, with this project, will be an engine for job growth in this region."

Once the NMTI is fully enrolled, the project will mean about 30 new jobs, from faculty members to groundskeepers and custodial staff to administration support staff.

"This will add to the base of jobs in the region, which I believe is a big part of the reason the state viewed it as a worthwhile investment," Whiteway said.

He says he's grateful to Malloy and Department of Economic and Community Development Commissioner Catherine Smith "for agreeing this was a valuable and worthwhile investment for the state to make" and to Stillman and State Rep. Betsy Ritter, D-Waterford, for their support.

There is a practical reason for the O'Neill to create the NMTI. Whiteway said the NMTI "further stabilizes the O'Neill on a long-term basis with our earned revenue growth. With new tuitions, the O'Neill will be on firm

financial footing for a long time to come."

Artistically, too, it makes sense. The NMTI seemed a natural way to expand the O'Neill's NTI and to leverage the deep professional connections it already has to musical theater via its summer National Music Theater Conference, Whiteway said.

He said it also cements the O'Neill as a center for education and puts the O'Neill even more on the cutting edge of pushing forward the art form of musical theater.

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