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Expansion on key for Eastman Theatre

The current \$9 million first phase is part of a project to top \$35M

By NATE DOUGHERTY

Construction of a 37,620-square-foot addition to the Eastman Theatre is moving forward on schedule as downtown development officials and Eastman School of Music administrators look forward to the impact the renovations will have for the school and surrounding area.

The first phase of the two-year project, a \$9 million upgrade of the existing theater's infrastructure, including new air-conditioning and heating units and sound attenuated ductwork, was completed last month. Construction on the addition is ongoing, with foundation and



Photo courtesy of Eastman School of Music

Renovations are expected to give the Eastman School a competitive edge with other performing-arts schools.

mason work going on through January and steel being fabricated for an expected delivery in February.

The outline of the addition can be seen

from East Main Street as construction crews work on the foundation. An artist's rendering of the completed project sits atop a fence that surrounds the site, showing an extended facade connecting the addition to the existing theater.

With an estimated completion date still two years away, excitement is building for what is referred to as the "crown jewel of the University of Rochester music program."

"For the school this is a dent in our overall facilities needs and the first significant improvement in facilities since George Eastman built the place," said Douglas Lowry, dean of the Eastman School of Music. "This will be a huge plus for students and

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EASTMAN THEATRE

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faculty, and being situated right on the nexus point of the East End, we're proud of the fact we'll be playing a central role in making downtown a more robust arts and cultural district."

The estimated total cost for the renovation and expansion project will be greater than \$35 million. It is being carried out by the Pike Co. Inc., which has established a partnership with UR and also led a series of smaller-scale upgrades to the theater in 1970.

The addition will include a 2,200-square-foot recital hall and a rehearsal hall of approximately 3,190 square feet to go along with new faculty studios. Lowry said the space will give the school a competitive edge with other performing-arts schools.

"A great facility does not a great music school make, but with the environment we're working in we need to give a great space to our students," Lowry said. "Most people don't understand that the Eastman stage as it exists is the only adequate rehearsal space for our large ensembles and the RPO. Those recital spaces we were using are subpar, and this will be a fantastic alternative."

With plans to announce new academic programs in the coming months, the new facility will give students a nurturing environment and help the school in its mission to teach leadership in the music field, Lowry said.

"We have some exciting new ventures



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

The Eastman Theatre addition will include a recital hall, a rehearsal hall, new faculty studios and an extended facade connecting to the existing theater.

we will be announcing in the next couple of months involving new programs for music making," Lowry said. "We have a responsibility to be looking out for our students' futures. The music world they'll be occupying will be much different from what it looks like now, and it's all about

teaching them leadership."

Heidi Zimmer-Meyer, president of the Rochester Downtown Development Corp., said she is looking forward to the boost the completed theater will give to local development projects. With a large development site across from the theater, she expects the renovation to spur further growth to meet the needs of new students and increased patrons.

"There's no question that creating a much stronger presence for the Eastman Theatre and Eastman School of Music will have huge impact locally," Zimmer-Meyer said. "The potential for other expansions in that area is very real. This will also create the ability not only for increased performances but the potential to expand the school of music and jazz festival and bring more and more people downtown."

One of the most interesting aspects of the increase in audiences is that it reaches across demographics, Zimmer-Meyer said. She noted the public stage on Gibbs Street attracted 5,000 people each day to the jazz festival, which helps leverage the drawing power of the Eastman Theatre.

The expansion also could mean eventual growth for the Grove Place neighborhood across Main Street from the theater, Zimmer-Meyer said.

"The potential to see the boundaries of that neighborhood expand and strengthen is an impact that we could be seeing," Zimmer-Meyer said.

Inside the theater, 800 seats will be removed from the back and sides of the or-

chestra level to allow for wider aisles, the addition of box seats and the expansion of the lobby. The seat reduction will leave the hall with 2,250 seats and create an atmosphere that will improve acoustics as well as the experience for the audience and performers.

"The reductions mean the concert experience will be altered, so that 1,000 people at an RPO concert in a 2,250-seat concert hall will look substantially fuller," Lowry said. "This will bring up enthusiasm for attendance at our ensemble and the RPO performances and brings us much more in line with the great concert halls across the country. Acoustical engineers often use 2,200 seats as a benchmark and it creates a happy medium for a concert hall."

This portion of the renovation is set to take place during a 92-day window from July to October 2009, when the Eastman School is not in session and the RPO is not holding concerts in the theater. It also will include the addition of new lighting and sound systems and refurbishing of seats in the mezzanine level, which has begun.

Michael Flannery, project director for the Pike Co., said after spending this summer and early fall focusing on the first round, next year's renovations will show a significant difference inside the theater.

"You won't see the 'wow' factor this season, when we were more focused on getting the groundwork done," Flannery said. "But after the next round of changes it will create a big 'wow' for the theater proper."

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