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Alexander Theatre Renovation and Emergency Safe Room Project Moves Forward After Gerville Larsen's Death, With CZM Approval Secured

After Gerville Larsen's death last October, the St. Croix Foundation's Alexander Theatre renovation is moving forward with CMA as lead architectural and engineering firm, a safe-room plan for about 600 people, and CZM approval of federal consistency.

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The image contrasts the Alexander Theater under construction with the St. Croix Foundation's vision for the venue, showing tiered seating, warm lighting and a polished performance space.

The St. Croix Foundation's renovation and retrofitting of the Alexander Theatre is moving forward with a new architectural and engineering lead after the death of renowned architect Gerville Larsen last October, clearing a major permitting hurdle Tuesday when the St. Croix Coastal Zone Management Committee approved the project's federal consistency determination.

Mr. Larsen's passing was felt deeply in the St. Croix community, and particularly by the St. Croix Foundation, where he had played an integral role in the effort to transform the Alexander Theatre into a performance venue that could also serve as an emergency safe room. On Tuesday, committee members were told that the project is back on track with a new architectural and engineering team in place.

Project consultant Haley Cutler said CMA, the engineering firm that had been working under Mr. Larsen's firm Taller Larjas, was recently awarded the contract to serve as the lead architectural and engineering firm for the project following a competitive bidding process.

Ms. Cutler welcomed the development, noting that "they've been involved in the project since its inception and will be able to carry all of the design intent forward in Mr. Larsen's vision."

"There'll be seamless continuity from the design package that you have already reviewed," Ms. Cutler assured committee members.

Committee members also asked about the facility's post-construction maintenance budget. Ms. Cutler said the theater is expected to generate revenue through venue rentals. Theater operations will also be funded at least in part through operating grants, with maintenance spending built into those funding plans.

During emergency situations, the facility is expected to operate as a safe room. Costs associated with that function will be compensated through a contract with the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency, Ms. Cutler said, noting that "we have a fully detailed operations and maintenance plan" that must be approved by the Federal Emergency Management Agency before the end of October.

Most of the committee's remaining questions focused on how the theater would function as a safe space during emergencies. Committee members noted that the facility is expected to accommodate somewhere in the region of 600 people during that time and asked how parking would be managed during a disaster.

Ms. Cutler noted that theater management would not be responsible for operating the facility during those periods. However, she said VITEMA would "encourage public transportation and people being dropped off."

One key benefit of using the retrofitted theater complex as an emergency shelter is "because of its walking distance to key highly vulnerable neighborhoods," committee members were told. The expectation is that accessible parking needs would be met, while "there is hope that a lot of people would not bring their cars" and risk damage from the elements during a disaster.

Final capacity numbers will be calculated "based on the ventilation requirements for this safe room," according to Akima Edwards, technical consultant with the St. Croix Foundation.

Foundation President Deanna James also assured committee members that Mr. Larsen's major role in spearheading the Alexander Theatre renovation would be appropriately recognized.

“We’ve been thinking long and hard, beyond things like naming opportunities inside the theater,” she disclosed. “We’re just trying to make sure that whatever we decide, that it is deeply meaningful and reflects what he meant to all of us at the foundation.”

Following the discussion, commissioners approved the project’s federal consistency determination, clearing one major hurdle for the St. Croix Foundation as it advances the construction process.

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