

SWFLATODAY

Gulfshore Playhouse gets \$14M for theater

Campaign within \$5M of groundbreaking goal

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Some \$14 million in gifts in the last three months has given the **Gulfshore Playhouse** capital campaign the leverage to pull the curtain on a groundbreaking date for September.

The campaign announced that eight couples, including two anonymous donors, brought the campaign total to \$33 million, within \$5 million of its groundbreaking goal.

“And that’s since Thanksgiving,”



Coury

marveled Kristen Coury, founder and producing artistic director of the playhouse. The restriction on in-person meetings and group events had brought its campaign to a grinding halt, she

said.

“For the first half of the lockdown we thought we’re just not going to ask anybody for anything and it would be disrespectful, and we’ve never asked over a Zoom, and how would that look,” she recalled.

“But by Thanksgiving, we’d all been so used to it, and the stock market had

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A rendering of the new Gulfshore Playhouse Theatre and Education Center in Naples SUBMITTED

Theater

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done very well. People were inclined to be generous and, I think, were excited to support an organization that's all about live, in-person meetings and gatherings.

"I think people miss it so much they were willing to invest in it. They understand the impact it's going to make on downtown Naples. They're excited about it becoming a landmark in downtown."

The groundbreaking, previously planned for April, is now tentatively set for September. And that is largely a function of the pandemic's cost to city operations, Coury said.

"We finished our documents in September of last year, and what would have been normal prepandemic would have six, seven months of applications, permits, design review — all of that," she said.

"But it seems — with the slight delay in the city deciding about the garage, and the design review and permits taking about twice as long as normal because of COVID — that we're looking at not being able to have the final approvals to break ground until about September," Coury continued.

In the meantime, the theater is working to raise the final \$5 million of its pre-construction goal. Another \$18 million must be raised during construction, which Coury is estimating two years maximum.

"We're planning on the '23-24 season in the new building and hope nothing happens that causes any major delay,"



A rendering of the lobby of the planned Gulfshore Playhouse Theatre and Education Center in Naples.

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she said. Because staff and donors had anticipated an April groundbreaking, the group is staging a mid-campaign celebration at the site, by invitation only, for donors.

The \$14 million in donations came from two anonymous donors as well as longtime supporters, headed by a \$5 million gift from Steve Akin, chairman of the Gulfshore Playhouse board of directors and co-chair of the capital campaign Committee, along with his wife, Jane. Campaign cochair Rich Struthers and his wife, Glenda, have pledged \$2.5 million.

Another campaign cochair, Susan Regenstein, also a member of the board, contributed \$1 million with Barry Frank.

Board member David Wilson and his wife, both arts and education supporters, pledged \$1 million, and another \$1 million has come from the John and Carol Walter Family Foundation. Naples residents David and Vicky Smith have also committed \$500,000.

Two couples who asked to remain anonymous contributed \$2 million and \$1 million gifts.

Gulfshore Playhouse operations were given a boost recently by its annual benefit. All contributions were matched by the theater's longtime supporters, Jay and Patty Baker, which brought giving to \$1.4 million total.

And Naples City Council, acting as the Community Redevelopment Agency, approved a memorandum of understanding for a partnership with Gulfshore Playhouse that would build a parking garage in the quadrant housing the theater complex, on land provided by the playhouse. Garage size and other details are still being planned.

The entire cost of the new theater on Goodlette Road South close to U.S. 41 is estimated at \$59.8 million. The 40,000-square-foot complex would include a 350-seat mainstage theater and lobby, a 150-seat studio theater, rehearsal spaces, an outdoor rooftop terrace, bar and café, founder's lounge and a dedicated education wing.

"It's all kinds of moving pieces right now, but we think all the choices being made right now are for the betterment of Naples in general and a catalyst for growth downtown," Coury said.

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