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Editorial: Victory Theatre restoration worth it

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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HOLYOKE MA **EDITORIAL** **HISTORY** **CULTURE**

It's easy to cringe at the idea of spending more than \$44 million to restore a 98-year-old, run-down theater in Holyoke whose last hurrah was a 1979 showing of the film "Every Which Way But Loose," starring Clint Eastwood.

Given all the other challenges facing this city, from its schools and local economy to crime and abandoned properties, some might say such money would be better spent elsewhere.

But champions of the Victory Theatre in Holyoke believe that restoring the iconic building could help address some of these problems in the Paper City, where a burgeoning creative economy has been stirring for years. We agree.

The Victory is a 1,600-seat, Broadway-style theater located on the corner of Suffolk and Chestnut streets that opened in 1920 and was acquired from the City of Holyoke by the Massachusetts International Festival of the Arts in 2009. In its heyday, the Marx Brothers and Bing Crosby performed on its stage, which was originally built for theatrical performances before it turned into a movie house in 1931. According to MIFA, the organization has made it a major goal to return the once-glorious venue to its original role as a live theater for Holyoke, its surrounding communities and the Connecticut River Valley, from Long Island Sound to the Canadian border.

To put the theater in some perspective, it has double the capacity of the Academy of Music in Northampton and more than double that of the Colonial Theater in Pittsfield and Mahawie Performing Arts Center in Great Barrington. It was built by the Goldstein Brothers Amusement Co., and the Victory, with its double-tiered balcony and Art Deco decor, was considered the company's flagship theater in the region.

Last week, supporters of the project, including local and state officials, gathered at the theater to celebrate the progress made and announcement of Gov. Charlie Baker's authorization of \$13 million in state bonds for the



The Victory Theater in Holyoke seats 1600. The seats will be refurbished as part of the renovation project which just received 13 million in bonds from the state on Monday, September 17, 2018.

Victory's renewal. The money is expected to help get the first "pre-construction" phase of the project underway, which involves architects and contractors preparing final drawings. MIFA has set an opening target date of December 2020.

So far, MIFA has raised \$28.2 million towards the effort. The good news is that it is drawing on a wide range of financial sources for this project, including private, individual, corporate, and foundation donations, as well as public grants, state and federal historic tax credits and new market tax credits. In recent years, getting political backing for the project has been critical, and that was in full display last week as officials talked excitedly about the opportunities a newly restored Victory Theatre could bring to the region.

State Sen. Eric Lesser, D-Longmeadow, said it was the efforts of western Massachusetts mayors and Donald T. Sanders, MIFA's executive artistic director, that helped get the project on the Legislature's radar, including the Committee on Economic Development and Emerging Technologies, on which Lesser serves as co-chairman. "The arts and culture scenes — especially in the Pioneer Valley and western Massachusetts — are inextricably linked to economic development."

In addition to leveraging the arts as to help grow the economy and revitalize the city, MIFA is pegging a new Victory Theatre as a regional asset that would bring jobs, tourism and commerce through the arts and historic preservation. MIFA wants the theater to offer Broadway shows and a vocational training program for high school and college students, along with the establishment of a Latino theater company and an international arts academy, to name some of its planned goals.

For those who want to learn more about the project and the people behind it, there is ample information available on MIFA's website at mifafestival.org, including an 85-page strategic business plan that not only lays out the opportunities but also considers the threats to the project's success.

Sanders is right when he talks about the power of the arts to unite, and that is evident in the momentum the Victory Theatre project has built already. We believe there is every reason to rally behind it.