

Grant to fund arts study for Old South BR



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Photo provided by the Foundation for Historical Louisiana. Efforts are under way to reopen the Lincoln Theatre on Myrtle Walk in Baton Rouge, spearheaded by the East Baton Rouge Redevelopment Authority and the Louisiana Black History Hall of Fame.

by Chad calder

Advocate business writer

The Arts Council of Greater Baton Rouge will lead an effort to foster arts and cultural development in Old South Baton Rouge, the neighborhood between downtown and LSU.

Using a \$300,000 grant from the Kresge Foundation, the arts council and the Center for Planning Excellence will hold public workshops, hire a national consultant and develop a feasibility study and implementation plan to seed arts- and culture-related businesses, primarily around the shuttered historic Lincoln Theater on Myrtle Walk.

A separate effort to reopen the Lincoln Theatre and build the Louisiana Black History Hall of Fame Museum is currently under way but still in the fundraising

stages.

Derek Gordon, president and chief executive officer of the arts council, said the two-year process will kick off in September and will include public workshops and the hiring of a national consultant. A major goal will be developing live/work spaces for artists around the theater.

Old South has already received an official “cultural products district” designation from the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism. That status, also granted to downtown, Midcity and a stretch of Perkins Road, allows any restoration of historic buildings there to qualify for a 25 percent tax credit. Also, anyone selling original works of art created within the district can do so without charging state and local sales taxes.

Gordon said St. Francis Xavier school on Julia Street might present opportunities by bolstering arts curriculum and using some of its space for live/work studios or arts development.

He said the effort will also look for ways to connect the Old South district with arts and culture assets in nearby downtown, Government Street and the City Park area.

Gordon said the plan’s time frame could be sped up depending on the revitalization of the Lincoln Theater, an effort spearheaded by the East Baton Rouge Parish Redevelopment Authority and the Louisiana Black History Hall of Fame.

Walter Monsour, the RDA’s president and chief executive officer, said the first phase of the two-phase project is the \$7.5 million renovation of the theater, once an icon that attracted some of the country’s best-known African-American performers.

RDA has \$4.5 million in grants and tax credits set aside for that and is working on getting up to \$1 million in state capital outlay funds moved to priority one status in the current legislative session. The remaining \$2 million will come from private fundraising efforts by the Louisiana Black History Hall of Fame.

The first phase would reopen the theater and include parking, landscaping and a walking trail with signs detailing historic moments for the theater and neighborhood.

The second phase, at \$6 million, will be the construction of the Louisiana Black History Hall of Fame Museum next to the Lincoln Theater. That project will be largely funded by donations and revenue generated from the theater’s films, concerts and public events.

Monsour said it is too difficult to say with any certainty when construction could

start because it all depends on fundraising by the Black History Hall of Fame.

Questions about those efforts were referred to Dennis Blunt, who could not be reached for comment.

Monsour said the Lincoln Theater's success will be pivotal to the revitalization of the Old South district.

"It's an iconic structure and what it represents for the African-American community is enormous," he said. "In its heyday, virtually every big name African-American entertainer played at the Lincoln Theater. It is clearly a catalytic project and can serve as the hub of a wheel we can branch off of."

Gordon thanked the Kresge Foundation, noting the bulk of the cultural district study will be funded by its grant.

"The support of the Kresge Foundation was a major check mark in getting this project to move forward," he said.

Editor's note: This story was changed on May 29, 2012 to note that Old South had already received a cultural products district designation from the state.

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