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Saint John Theatre Company receives \$12M from feds for courthouse transformation

Goal is to turn 200-year-old building into modern performance space

[Nipun Tiwari](#) · CBC News · Posted: Oct 30, 2024 6:00 AM ADT | Last Updated: October 30



The Sydney Street courthouse, as it's known to most Saint Johners, has stood on the eastern edge of King Square for nearly 200 years. (Julla Wright/CBC)

The Saint John Theatre Company is getting \$12 million from the federal government for the group's Sydney Street courthouse project, signaling the start of the project's construction phase.

"We took ownership the first week of March 2020 and then we shut down for COVID just a few days later," said Stephen Tobias, executive director of the theatre company.

"So at that point, everything was derailed for several years. We're back in the game. This funding certainly doesn't represent the end of the project, but it certainly represents the beginning and aggressive start of construction and development."

The project, now more than five years in the works, aims to transform the 200-year-old, long-vacant courthouse across from King Square park into a modern performance space.



The three-story, modern addition incorporates an opaque glass façade. (Submitted by the Saint John Theatre Company)

The money comes from the Green and Inclusive Community Buildings program, which funds environmentally conscious retrofit projects, and brings the project closer to its goal of \$30 million.

"Several years ago, this project, based on the current designs, [was] valued at \$17.8 million. The designs have not changed since then," said Tobias.

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The Saint John Theatre company is getting \$12 million from the federal government to transform the 200-year-old Sydney Street Courthouse into a modern performance space. The project has been in the works for over five years.

"What has changed is the price of steel, the cost of labour, the availability of materials. And so like all construction projects in the country and frankly probably in the entire world, we've gone through a range of inflationary pressures on this and now we're looking at a \$30-million project."

The theater company is contributing more than \$13 million to the project and the City of Saint John is contributing \$818,000, according to a media release.

Tobias said construction is expected to begin in spring 2025, with a potential opening date in late 2027 or early 2028.

Project will preserve city landmark

Mayor Donna Reardon said the building will be the "No. 1" place to be in Saint John.

"A huge credit to the Saint John Theatre company for their dedication to the arts and to preserving this landmark here on King Square," Reardon said.

"They're going to reinvent and reimagine this incredible piece of our history, creating an interactive and dynamic space where the stories, our stories and everyone's story can be told through all the different facets of the arts."



Saint John Mayor Donna Reardon says the theatre company will reinvent a piece of the city's history with the project. (Nipun Tiwari/CBC)

The building fell out of use after the law courts at Peel Plaza were constructed over a decade ago. In [2017](#), the province introduced a bill to repeal a nearly 200-year-old trust for the courthouse so the historic building could be developed for other uses.

The Saint John Theatre Company acquired the building in 2020.

The upgrades will be significant, with the company planning a three-storey addition to the courthouse while preserving much of its historic architecture.

A space for mid-range events

The renovated space will be home to the Atlantic Repertory Company, which provides paid experience and opportunities to emerging young theatre artists with ties to Atlantic Canada.

The building will have three main levels. The first will be a public space with a café and bar that will be open to the public, regardless of whether or not there is a performance underway.

The second floor, what was once the courtroom where jury trials were held pre-2013, will be the theater space and will have a seating capacity of 220.



Saint John Theatre Company director Stephen Tobias says other theatre spaces in the city are either too large or too small for certain productions. (Nipun Tiwari/CBC)

The theatre company uses the nearby 900-seat Imperial Theatre and 100-seat Princess Street-based BMO theatre for performances. But the city doesn't have a space for more mid-range productions, making the courthouse "just the right solution," Tobias said.

"The BMO studio is too small for that kind of work," he said.

"And Imperial Theatre is an amazing venue that we use one month out of every year, but it's not really useful. It's too big for that kind of unique professional theatre work that the Atlantic Repertory Company allows us to create."

For the growth of the Atlantic Repertory Company program, which is the professional development wing, Tobias said there's a need for a "producing theatre that has the capacity to build and create work, and then showcase that work for an appropriate-sized audience."

The third floor will be a rehearsal space.