Composing a renaissance

Theater restoration set to begin in January promises economic boost for town.

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CROWLEY — Grand theater performances, concerts, ballets, operas and more will find a historic venue in Crowley in coming years, as the Grand Opera House of the South will be restored to its original 1901 grandeur.

Work is set to begin in January on the first phase of renovation at the venue, which sits upstairs from the Dixie Hardware store on North Parkerson Street downtown.

“We want this to be a full performing arts venue,” said Kim Gattie, executive director of the opera house. “We want to have theater, dance and music, and hopefully we can do some operas.”

Gattie set up a nonprofit to facilitate the $4.9 million renovation. It will be funded in part by state grants — $3.15 million — and the rest by donations and fund-raisers.

The opera house also received $150,000 in federal funds, thanks to retiring U.S. Sen. John Breaux and U.S. Rep. Chris John, both of Crowley.

The nonprofit holds fund-raising events throughout the year, most recently hosting a concert in the Rice Theater with Freddy Cole, a Grammy-nominated jazz musician and younger brother of Nat King Cole.

Although the opera house building is in relatively good condition aesthetically, it needs some expensive structural work, said Don Breaux, the architect for the project.

“We’re trying to restore it to what it was originally, and it’s in relatively good shape,” Breaux said. “The building hasn’t had that many changes made, and what we’re trying to do is upgrade it and put it in the condition it was.”

Modern conveniences, such as air conditioning and up-to-date electrical wiring, are necessary additions to the authentic structure, he said. The plans also call for adding dressing rooms and a freight elevator to get props from the ground level to the stage level.

“So, we’re really upgrading it to meet current codes, but there’s some really beautiful details in the building that we’ll keep,” Breaux said.

Breaux has worked with a theater consultant from New York to ensure the staging area will suit major productions.

The third floor of the building will also house a ballroom at the back of the balcony area, available for pre- and post-performance gatherings and other receptions. “It’s a very quaint, personal place,” Gattie said.

The first phase of construction launches as early as January of next year, Breaux and Gattie said.

“It’s going to expose and let the people here experience the arts because a lot of people don’t realize how valuable they are,” Gattie said.

The opera house also will have an impact on Crowley’s economy, she said.

“When artists come, they have to eat our food, buy our gas, sleep in our hotels, shop in our shops,” Gattie said.