

# Construction of amphitheater in front of Decatur's Old State Bank to get under way next month

By Kelly Kazek | [kkazek@al.com](mailto:kkazek@al.com)



*A rendering of the amphitheater planned for the lawn of historic Old State Bank in Decatur. (Contributed by the City of Decatur)*

DECATUR, Alabama - Last summer when Gary Hammon thought of building an amphitheater in Founders Park in front of Decatur's historical Old State Bank, he didn't realize he wasn't the first person to have the idea.

As the project got under way, plans from the 1970s were discovered that showed the park was designed for an amphitheater, with a "bowl" in the center and berms to block traffic noise from alternate U.S. Highway 72 so a stage could be placed on the site. For some reason, it never was.

That's about to change. The majority of funds have been raised for the \$200,000 project and plans have been drawn for the circular stage and terraced seating, said Hammon, president of the Decatur City Council. Some of the funding comes from a grant, matched by the City of Decatur, from the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs and \$100,000 was donated last summer by Daiken America Inc., in honor of the company's 25 years of operation in Decatur.



*Decatur City Council President Gary Hammon walks across the site for the amphitheater, which was already designed with a bowl in the center and a berm to block traffic noise. The historic Old State Bank, built in 183, is to the left. (Kelly Kazek/kkazek@al.com)*

Hammon said he had hoped the amphitheater would be under construction when Daiken officials returned to Decatur from Japan for Daiken Fest in May but plans are still being tweaked. However, signs touting the area as the future home of the amphitheater and some earth work will be under way next month.

Hammon said city officials will invite the Japanese officials to a blessing ceremony at the site during their visit.

After that, construction will take about six months, he said.

Hammon said he hopes the amphitheater will draw people to Decatur.

"Last year, my wife Diann and I were at a Beatles event at the amphitheater at Botanical Gardens and I thought, 'We need one of these in front of the Old State Bank,'" Hammon said.

His thought was to create a stage and terraced seating to hold concerts, dramas and other events in the park. The lawn's proximity to two major downtown churches - First Baptist and First United Methodist - make it an ideal location for Vacation Bible School and church plays, Hammon said.

### **Dramas in the park**

When Dr. Robert Glenn, president of Athens State University, heard of the plan for an amphitheater, he told Hammon of another use: college plays and musical events. Hammon loved the idea and appointed Dr. Hugh Long, newly hired associate professor of drama and English and artistic director of the Athenian Players, and Dr. William Godsey, a theater professor at Calhoun Community College in Decatur, to a committee helping to plan to amphitheater.

Long, a Boston native and television and film actor, envisions staging dramas, musical events and eventually Shakespeare in the Park events at the amphitheater.

"It would give us an outdoor space that could be used for the Alabama Center for the Arts," he said. The Center is a cooperative effort among the City of Decatur, Morgan County, Calhoun Community College and Athens State University. Art classes are held in the building, as well as exhibits and events.

Long and Godsey told the committee what would be needed to hold outdoor dramas and plans were drawn for moveable acoustic panels.

"That would allow for us to amplify the sound of any performances for any audience," Long said. "They've done a great job in terms of overall design."

Athens State, an upper level college where students enter as juniors after completing associates degrees, has a drama program and student theater group, the Athenian Players, while Calhoun has drama as well as a jazz band, chorale and other musical ensembles. ASU is in the beginning stages of planning a music program to offer degrees there, Long said.

The amphitheater will help Long fulfill his mission of bringing the theater to the community instead of asking the community to come to the theater.

### **Double wow**

When completed, the amphitheater should create a "double-wow factor" for people entering town on alternate U.S. Highway 72, Hammon said.

Visitors already say, "Wow" when passing the lighted fountain and impressive Old State Bank, he said, then "suddenly, you'll see a piece of architecture," also featuring lights and columns.

"I want two wows every time people drive by," Hammon said.

Building the amphitheater and creating terraced seating are Phase I of a three-phase plan that may at some point include a cover for the stage, he said, but city officials wanted to get the first phase completed in a timely manner.

"Like in 'Field of Dreams,' I said, 'Let's build it and they will come,'" Hammon said.

*Follow Kelly Kazek on **Twitter**. Email her at [kkazek@al.com](mailto:kkazek@al.com) or call 256-701-0576 or find her on **Facebook**.*