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NYC Irish Arts Center receives \$1m gift from Bob and Kate Devlin

Debbie McGoldrick March 16, 2015

The Irish Arts Center's fundraising campaign for its new building on the West Side of Manhattan has received a major boost with the donation of a \$1 million gift from New York-based businessman and philanthropist Bob Devlin and his wife Kate.

The grant represents the first seven figure donation ever received by the Irish Arts Center. Executive Director Aidan Connolly said the Devlins are the perfect partners as the center looks to the future and its plans for a new state of the art, multi-level home.

"Bob and Kate have come to see so much of our programming. They get what we're trying to do and the way we're trying to do it," Connolly told the Irish Voice. "We're trying to expand our own community by bringing it to the broader one."



The center was given the opportunity under the Clinton/Hell's Kitchen Urban Renewal Plan to acquire a new site close to its present old and cramped facility at West 51st Street off 11th Avenue for \$1. New York City committed to giving the center \$30 million for the redevelopment of the building, provided that it can raise the remainder of what Connolly estimates will be a final project cost of \$57-\$60 million.

The city's financial commitment increased to \$34 million, Connolly says, thanks to an additional \$4 million in support from the administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio, matching support from the City Council under Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito. Members of the council and administration met with the center's leaders last year not long after their election and were impressed with their goal of a future home for the Irish arts.

So far, the center has raised roughly \$44 million, which includes a \$3.5 million donation from the Irish government early on that allowed the center to put together a team and a plan.

Before the project can proceed to the stage where the city's funds can be unlocked, the center will have to show that it's roughly 90-95 percent of the way towards financing the construction cost. Connolly estimates that roughly 75 percent has been raised, and that more commitments are on the way.

Connolly is hoping for a sooner-rather-than-later scenario for a groundbreaking, and says the center is working diligently to promote its vision to attract new supporters.

"We know that we will be successful," Connolly says. "We do cultivation events every month where we meet new people and tell them about what we're doing. We feel like we have a lot of momentum and we're excited about moving forward."

The transition from the mayoral administration of Michael Bloomberg to de Blasio at the start of 2014 went smoothly, Connolly says. There are multiple layers involved in securing the deal and many agencies that have to sign off, chief among them the local community board which the center has worked closely with. The public approval process for the project, Connolly says, is now complete.

The Irish government's donation of an architect from the Irish Office of Public Works, he adds, has been especially helpful in navigating the road ahead. "It's been great to have the architect to work through various design iterations, and working in partnership with our team here," Connolly said.

Last year on St. Patrick's Day, the center unveiled plans and photos for the new multi-floor building which will include a new 200 seat theater that's double the size of the center's present home. There will also be a café and a social space in the lobby, an array of new classrooms and studios, and the first ever dance floor/studio built for the primary purpose of performing Irish dance.

"We've consulted with many, many people on what we should be doing and how we should be doing it," says Connolly.

A vital element to the success of the new building, Connolly says, will be grassroots community involvement.

"For our project to reach its full potential, everyone needs to be involved," Connolly says. "We welcome everyone's support and input."