



A NEW STAGE



Balancing Tree Preservation and Progress San Luis Obispo Repertory Theatre and the Cultural Arts District

The Building Project Begins

As far back as the early 1990s, the City Council gave direction to pursue plans for a new, expanded theatre near the corner of Monterey and Broad Street. In March 2000, the site was conceptually approved for SLO REP's use. By 2012, the City of San Luis Obispo and SLO REP were finally ready to embark on a landmark journey: The creation of a new, state-of-the-art theatre in Downtown SLO. Situated on a City-owned parcel at the intersection of Monterey, Palm, and Nipomo streets – adjacent to the new Cultural Arts District Parking Structure – this project represents a historic public-private partnership.

The City's commitment includes a 99-year lease of the site at \$1 per year. In response, the community has shown extraordinary resolve; as of February 2026, SLO REP has raised more than \$22 million, fueled primarily by the generosity of private donors as well as a \$6.7 million challenge grant from the City. This collaboration traces its origins to the visionary **Downtown Concept Plan**, which first imagined a thriving Cultural Arts District anchored by a professional theatre and enhanced public infrastructure.

Tree Preservation as a Priority

From the earliest sketches of the new theatre, the preservation of the onsite oak tree has been a core priority. Our design team deliberately established a safety zone around what was then understood to be the lateral extent of tree. This standard informed our architectural plans from the first sketch.

During the City's entitlement review process in 2018–2019, our plans and renderings showed what we thought was the extent of the tree. Following a thorough public review, the City Council formally approved SLO REP's plans in 2019, with the shared understanding that the tree would be preserved.

The 2025 Surprise

In July 2025, as construction of the Cultural Arts District Parking Structure neared completion, it was time for SLO REP to prepare a formal tree-protection plan as required by the City. To meet the City's standards, it was incumbent upon us to hire a professional arborist, who conducted a new study of the tree's health and root structure.

The results were unexpected and distressing. We learned that the tree's critical root structure extends significantly further than the canopy dripline. After a comprehensive analysis, both our independent arborist and the City's arborist reached a difficult consensus: The tree is unlikely to survive any significant construction activity. It is worth noting that the City has since updated its procedures to require these detailed reports earlier in the planning process to prevent such late-stage discoveries.

Exhausting All Alternatives

Despite the arborist's conclusion, we spent six weeks with our architects, engineers and consultants to explore redesign options. Ultimately, no viable path was found due to three primary factors:

- **Root Proximity:** The shallow root system is now estimated to span nearly the entire building footprint, making it highly vulnerable to necessary foundation work.
- **Prior Root Zone Impact:** As detailed in the [February 3 City Staff Report](#) (p. 77), the roots had already been impacted by frontage improvements along Monterey Street.
- **Expert Consensus:** Both our arborist and the City's arborist concluded that the tree is unlikely to survive any major construction, without significant modifications to the building's footprint that would render the theatre economically unviable.

The City Council's Final Decision

At the February 3, 2026, meeting, the Council engaged in extensive deliberation, questioning City Staff and SLO REP Managing Artistic Director Kevin Harris. In addition to the aforementioned factors, the Council noted that the tree is not listed in the City's official tree inventory as a Heritage or a Significant tree.

In a 4-1 vote, the Council approved the request to remove the tree to allow the theatre project to proceed. The full deliberation can be viewed [HERE](#) beginning at the 46-minute mark.

Memorializing the Oak Tree

While we are saddened by the loss of the oak, we have shifted our focus toward a meaningful and responsible succession plan.

Our Board of Directors has committed to a landscape plan that exceeds City requirements, featuring several fast-growing, drought-tolerant species designed to diversify and strengthen the City's urban canopy.

We also have engaged a firm that specializes in reclaiming urban timber. This will allow the wood from the oak tree to be salvaged and integrated into the new theatre's interior, ensuring it maintains a permanent and honored presence within the building.

Looking Ahead

We expect to begin construction of the theatre this spring, with completion in late 2027. This milestone is the culmination of decades of work by visionary City Councils and the extraordinary generosity of nearly 500 private donors. We are grateful beyond words for the community's trust as we build a home for the arts that will serve San Luis Obispo for generations to come.

Contact

Please send any comments or questions to us at boardofdirectors@slorep.org.