



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**CHERRY GROVE OFFICIALLY DEDICATES ITS NEWLY RESTORED  
HISTORIC COMMUNITY HOUSE AND THEATER IN CEREMONIES THIS WEEKEND**

*\$1.2 Million Restoration Project Marked by a Weekend of Celebration  
in "America's First Gay and Lesbian Town"*

CHERRY GROVE, FIRE ISLAND (May 29, 2016) -- A five-year, \$1.2 million community development project that renovated and restored the historic Community House and Theater in this little seaside hamlet will culminate this weekend in a series of dedication ceremonies and celebrations.

"This is really a dream come true," said Diane Romano, president of the Cherry Grove Community Association which led the five-year effort. "We have built something new and beautiful and at the same time paid tribute to our own amazing 70-year-old history. What a day!!"

The new Community House and Theater will continue to function as the "heart" of Cherry Grove where all community organizations can gather for meetings and events. The new structure is wrapped around the handcrafted Harold I. Seeley Stage and proscenium which is believed to be the oldest continuously operating LGBT theater in the United States.

A "gut renovation," the restored building has new interiors, meeting rooms and restrooms, an archive room, and a 150-seat auditorium. The entire foundation was stabilized to withstand bay erosion and the impact of strong storms. New septic systems and a "dry" sprinkler system were installed. In addition, the "pavilion" was enclosed to provide more theater seating and space for community meetings. The exterior was shored up and wood shingles repaired and replaced as needed.

The original structure, an old barn floated across the Great South Bay and dragged to its present site in 1948, has been preserved and forms the section of the building which today houses the stage. In later years, building additions included a meeting room and the pavilion as well as an upstairs balcony and sound and light booth for performances.

**A "HISTORIC PLACE"**

The entire structure was designated in 2012 by the New York State Register of Historic Preservation as one of 27 state sites in [New York](#). The National Register of Historic Places, the official list of the nation's historic places worthy of preservation, also honored the site as historic. According to the New York State Register of Historic Preservation, the community

house provided "the small hamlet's civic needs and played an enormous role in shaping what gradually evolved into "America's First Gay and Lesbian Town."

Funds for restoration came mainly from private donations by Cherry Grove residents who contributed 70% of the needed \$1.2 million. A \$334,000 Economic Development Council grant from the New York State Department of Parks and Recreation provided the balance. Plans to create a rooftop deck overlooking the Great South Bay are scheduled for 2017.

Carl Luss, the Cherry Grove historian who was responsible for the state and Federal "historic site" designations, noted: "In the conservative climate of the mid-1940s, the community house provided a rare sanctuary where the integration and self-affirming presentation of homosexual men and lesbians in Cherry Grove's social life gave it exceptional historic significance."

It is estimated that literally hundreds of theatrical presentations and plays have been performed in the Community House, most by local talent but many by performers who later became well known.

Thom "Panzi" Hansen, president of the Arts Project of Cherry Grove which produces entertainment there, said: "This house has been the heart and soul of Cherry Grove seven decades and holds a unique and special place in the lives of gay men and women everywhere. Some of the world's most famous talents have trod the boards here in Cherry Grove."

## **ABOUT CHERRY GROVE**

One of the most popular gay resort communities in the United States, Cherry Grove is visited by people from all over the world and is reputedly the nation's first and oldest gay community, and the longest continuously inhabited resort on Fire Island. Settled in the mid-1800s, Cherry Grove evolved as a seaside resort, and by the early 1930s the area had become a beacon toward which gays were drawn, as well as an escape from hatred and intolerance. And by 1960, Cherry Grove had become the summer capitol of the gay world where drag and cross-dressing had become an important part of Cherry Grove's social and community life.

Today, virtually all of Cherry Grove's available land has been developed; it consists of approximately 280 houses and many commercial establishments. Since most houses are un-winterized summer homes, the year-round population of Cherry Grove is small. But the average daily summer population numbers in the thousands.

For more information, see <http://www.artsprojectcherrygrove.org/about-town/>

###

**CONTACT:** For more information, contact Joyce Yaeger, press relations, Cherry Grove Community Association, 917-783-6105 or 631-597-6099. Press materials including photos and floor plans can be downloaded from <http://cgcai.org/soch-press>