

Kiel Opera House plan wins final city approval



By [Tim Logan](#)

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The Kiel deal is done, at least on St. Louis' end.

Now the bid to revive the long-dark downtown landmark is in the hands of the bond market.

St. Louis aldermen on Friday approved a \$74 million plan to reopen the Kiel Opera House, voting 25-1 to approve a redevelopment proposal and city-backed financing.

Friday's move is a key step in the project, said David Checketts, owner of SCP Worldwide and the St. Louis Blues. And it opens the door for his company to start construction later this summer.

Up next? Selling the bonds, which are worth \$29 million and will be paid off

with amusement tax revenue on Blues tickets. That will give the project the cash it needs to start work, said Ken Munoz, a partner with SCP and its lead spokesman on Kiel.

The bond market is tricky right now — the Cardinals' Ballpark Village project has been stalled for months by weak demand for its bonds — and Munoz acknowledged there is some uncertainty.

"We've got some hills to climb yet," he said. "The sale of bonds in this economy is not necessarily easy."

But, Munoz said, it helps that the Kiel is a relatively small project, and he remained "hopeful and optimistic" that the bonds will sell within 60 days so that construction can start in August. SCP also has applied for about \$27 million in state and federal tax credits, Munoz said, and is talking with several St. Louis-area banks about a \$10 million loan for the project.

Friday's vote, he said, was a big step forward.

"We're very pleased," Munoz said. "We think it's a great project and we're glad the Board of Aldermen agreed."

The vote came as no surprise after a committee meeting last week in which members overwhelmingly approved the plan.

The only opposition came from Marlene Davis, who has voiced concern about the speed with which the complex financing deal moved through the city approval process. Davis' ward includes the Fox Theater, whose owners, Fox Associates, have blasted city financing for the Kiel. They see it as competition for the relatively limited supply of traveling Broadway shows.

To help ease those concerns, SCP agreed to limit the number of traveling Broadway-style shows at the Kiel for its first five years.

SCP's proposal could be a great thing for the city, said Alderwoman Phyllis Young, whose ward includes the Opera House.

In introducing the measure Friday, she ran through the many stops and starts Kiel has been through since it closed in 1991.

"Now we have an opportunity before us with people who are entirely capable of pulling this building together," Young said. "I don't know that we'll see an opportunity like this again in the future."

One of the people watching the vote was Ed Golterman, a longtime advocate for the Opera House.

He's worked for years to get the building reopened. He's lobbied politicians, penned letters to the newspaper and argued to anyone who would listen about the importance of Kiel to downtown tourism.

On the floor of the board chambers after Friday's vote, Golterman said watching the city officially put its muscle behind the deal was "very calming, very peaceful."

"I feel a lot of weight off my shoulders," he said. "It's a good day."