

# Now it's history



A worker at the Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Mich., works in 2001 on cleaning up the bus on which Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat. One of the victims of Washington's new tough-on-spending culture is the Save America's Treasures preservation program that has saved thousands of fragile national treasures like the Alabama bus. AP FILE

Earmark emphasis, austerity climate end preservation program

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PITTSBURG, Kan. —

When a new phase of restoration begins next week at the Colonial Fox Theatre, the sign out front will read: "Funded in part by Save America's Treasures program."

While a \$500,000 award from that federal program will continue to pay for theater restoration for

some time, the program itself became part of history last month when it was cut from the federal budget.

Begun in 1998 by first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, the Save America's Treasures program was a way to safeguard historical documents and artifacts. The program had bipartisan support. First lady Laura Bush later took up the cause. Among the more famous treasures that have been preserved: the flag that inspired "The Star Spangled Banner" and the bus in which Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat for a white passenger.



Vonnie Corsini, executive director of the Colonial Fox Theatre Foundation, stands Monday morning in front of the historic Pittsburg movie house as she defends the federal program that she says made her restoration effort possible. The program has been cut from the federal budget. *GLOBE | T. ROB BROWN*

But the program became a victim of the get-tough-on-spending climate in Washington as well as raids by lawmakers who used it to fund projects in their districts. President Barack Obama proposed terminating it last month, and Congress obliged. "While there have been many high quality projects, at least half of projects are annually earmarked by congress," the White House said in calling for cutting the program.

## Courthouse grant

**REGIONAL PROJECTS** funded by the Save America's Treasures program include restoration work at the Jasper County Courthouse in Carthage, which received \$ ,52 in 2006.

## **HISTORY: Theatre funding secure**

### **COLONIAL FOX**

The \$500,000 earmarked for the Pittsburg theater by then-U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback and U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts, both Republicans, is not in jeopardy: It was approved in 2009 and set aside to be drawn upon by Vonnie Corsini, director of the Colonial Fox Foundation, as contracts are awarded.

“Those bids include a new roof, tuckpointing the east, west and south exterior walls ... and restoring the east and west facades,” Corsini said Monday.

Today, she will open bids for asbestos removal, which she expects will cost about \$20,000.

Since saving the theater from demolition four years ago, the foundation has received private contributions, but without federal funding, Corsini said, completing the structural work — estimated to exceed \$1 million — would have been unlikely.

Corsini defended the program, saying the application was a “robust, detailed process” that required her to demonstrate the merit and validity of the project.

“I had to make our case, to show we’d been vetted by the state,” she said. “We weren’t just a congress person’s pet project.”

Part of that case was showing that the theater had been added to the state and national historic registers, and had received a Heritage Fund grant from the Kansas Historical Society.

Messages left with Brownback, now the governor of Kansas, were not returned Monday.

### **PRIVATE FUNDING?**

Critics of the program, like Steve Ellis, vice president of the watchdog group Taxpayers for Common Sense, say it used federal money to fund what should have been paid for privately.

That’s the question. In some of these cases, are we just substituting federal money for private money?”

“Of program grants totaling \$300 million over the past decade to almost 1,300 different sites, half were earmarks.

But with newly empowered Republicans renouncing earmarks and Obama threatening to veto any bill containing them, the program became an easy target.

Corsini said she couldn’t have leveraged private local funds without the program. The federal money required a local match, and local investors are more willing to contribute when a project has the credibility of state and federal backing, she said. “We are using federal funds to leverage local investments,” she said.

Amy Cole, a senior officer with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, said the \$300 million that was paid out during the past decade generated at least \$377 million more in matching funds.

She also argued that the money for the program was not direct taxpayer funding.

“(The projects are) funded out of offshore oil and gas lease revenues specifically targeted to conservation/preservation programs,” said Cole. “No money is being saved in this transaction that would devastate this country’s focus on preserving our national heritage.”

Said Corsini: “This is more than just restoring an old building. There are economic impact studies that support what a downtown theater or downtown cultural arts center can do. Some show an 80 percent return on an investment annually.

“What this does is allow us to bring jobs into the community. And, when something like this is done, new or expanding businesses follow. People begin hanging out and window shopping before a show or going out to eat after seeing a performance. Our downtown is the treasure.”