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Leahy brings \$125,000 for restoration of Ellis Block

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SPRINGFIELD — Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., brought \$125,000 in federal historic preservation funds Friday that will help pay for the restoration of the Ellis Block's historic facade.

Joined by dozens of people who had a hand in the highly-anticipated restoration project, Vermont's senior senator said the funds would allow the downtown block to regain its historic good looks.

Friday marked the formal groundbreaking for the \$3.4 million project, which is a joint effort of Housing Vermont and the Springfield Housing Authority.

Not only will the project restore some affordable housing to downtown Springfield, it will bring back the Springfield Movie Theater, which had been in almost continuous operation since The Great Depression.

"In Vermont, our downtowns are the heart of our communities," said Leahy, who said he visited Springfield and the movie theater as a child with his parents from their home in Montpelier.

"When we lose a central part of our community, we lose more than bricks and mortar," he said. "It's a good day for Springfield."

The project had already received \$1.28 million in federal Neighborhood Stabilization funds, through the Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008, as well as state funding and state tax credits and \$1.3 million in equity from Housing Vermont's housing equity fund.

The town of Springfield contributed \$25,000, and the local housing authority \$74,000.

But the extra money will allow a more historic restoration of the building's facade, said Nancy Owens, president of Housing Vermont.

Owens said the extra funds would allow custom windows for the historic arched windows in the block's facade on Main Street, as well as the expert restoration of a poured cast concrete decoration dating from the 1930s, which was uncovered after the fire.

The starburst pattern had been hidden by the movie theater's marquee.

Rich Wickman, project manager for Housing Vermont, said there would be a new, more historic marquee in the front of the theater, whose lobby will extend along the entire front of the first floor of the building.

An apartment for a handicapped person will also be on the first floor.

The movie theater will have three screens, including one digital, 3D screen.

Wickman and Bill Morlock of the Springfield Housing Authority said the two groups were close to hiring an operator for the theater, which was the site in July 2007 of the world premiere of "The Simpsons" movie about the popular television cartoon family, whose fictional home was always in Springfield.

Morlock joked he should now be called Metro Golden Morlock because of his quick immersion in the movie theater business.

He said the theater would reopen in spring 2011.

Wickman said the movie theater opened in either 1931 or 1932 at the height of The Great Depression, and closed for only a few years during its history.

Patty Chaffee, executive director of the Springfield Chamber of Commerce, said the theater was first known as The Ideal, with The Avon just next door, behind what is now Springfield Village Pizza.

"This is a very special day for our downtown," said Bob Flint, executive director of the Springfield Regional Development Corp., who noted the "surreal" turn of fortune for the block and movie theater, from Hollywood world premiere to devastating fire in a year.

"We were in shock," said Flint, calling the 2008 fire "a knife wound" to the heart of downtown Springfield.
