

# Arts district in the Oranges gets \$825,000 boost

By [Bondy/For The Star-Ledger](#)

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WEST ORANGE -- As part of an ongoing effort to create an arts district in Orange and West Orange, a local nonprofit received an \$825,000 grant from JPMorgan Chase yesterday to help build a large theatre space in the area.

On Tuesday, JPMorgan Chase representatives announced the grant for the Orange nonprofit Housing and Neighborhood Development Services, Inc., or HANDS. The money will go toward building a new home for Luna Stage, a professional nonprofit theatre that was located in Montclair until its building was sold earlier this year. The 8,000-square-foot space at 555 Valley St. in West Orange will include two theatres, a lobby with a cafe and a shop for set design. The theatre space has been under construction since August and is expected to be complete in March.

State Senator Richard Codey of West Orange was present for the announcement at the construction site Tuesday, lauding HANDS' effort to revitalize the Valley district, where he grew up on the Orange side. Over the past four years, HANDS has acquired five partially-abandoned blocks in the district, gradually transforming them into about 100 arts venues and artist housing units.

"The Valley is a very vital part of not only Orange, but of West Orange," said Codey. "I would love to see the neighborhood come back through projects like Luna." Jane Mandel, artistic director of Luna Stage, said she was excited to settle down. The theatre, which hosts performances, readings and classes, was based in Montclair for 16 seasons and lost its space in May after the building's owner sold it. Mandel received an offer from HANDS to move to West Orange and was eager to snatch it. "Our audience was not just based in Montclair, they were based from everywhere," Mandel said. "We're not so afraid of losing our audience, because this location is at the center of it all."

Since September, Luna Stage has been operating in a temporary space on Tompkins Street in Orange while the Valley Street building was under construction. Mandel said she has already received requests to use the new space for performances and classes.