

The Berkshire Eagle

Sit back and enjoy the show: Beacon Cinema is replacing seats with recliners.



The Beacon cinema is converting from its existing stadium seating to recliners, like this one in the lobby starting in July.

BEN GARVER - THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

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This story has been modified to reflect that Regal Cinemas offers a discount rate for membership card holders.

PITTSFIELD — Things are about to get cushier at the Beacon Cinema.

The downtown theater is the latest in the region to convert its existing seating to larger reclining seats.

The \$500,000 upgrade, set to begin in July, will be its first since opening in 2009.

The conversion will cut its number of seats in half — from about 700 to 350. Ticket prices will not increase.

"We did a lot of research, and it is clear that our customers are looking for more value," said Beacon Manager Lydia Shulman. "They are more likely to come here if they don't have to pay as much."

The Beacon has lower ticket prices than Regal Cinemas at the Berkshire Mall, which also has reclining seats.

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The hope is to recapture customers it has lost to Regal in the past two years, she said.

Ticket sales at the six-theater Beacon have been down since Regal fitted its 10 theaters with reclining seats in February 2015.

Shulman estimated the Beacon lost up to half of its customers to Regal after the change.

"Which goes to show that [recliners] is what people want," she said.

She said the new price structure is still being determined.

Current Beacon pricing to a standard format movie is \$6 to \$10 depending on the day and time of the showing. That same ticket to a movie at Regal ranges from \$9.45 to \$11.45, although Regal offers a \$6.70 rate to its Regal Club members on Tuesdays.

Once the recliners are installed, seating will become reserved. It is currently general admission seating.

News of the seating conversion, posted on the Beacon's Facebook page, was met with mixed reviews.

Some welcomed the plush seats and pushed for a change to reserved seating. Others expressed a variety of concerns including that the change would mean increased ticket prices and the loss of general assignment seating.

"Love the Beacon's intimate size and everywhere we travel has already upgraded to this," one patron wrote. "I like the assigned seats idea now. Especially if you have a large group."

Lenox resident Jessica Jezak said she is opposed to reserved seating because it often makes it difficult to sit together. She said she picks her seats at the theater, instead of reserving in advance online.

"We always choose the Beacon over the Regal," because they are less expensive and are general admission, Jezak said.

One patron said online that the recliners are "too comfortable."

"Don't ask me about the plot of the second 'Avengers' movie, or the middle 20 minutes of 'The Force Awakens,' " he wrote. "I fell asleep."

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Whether the new seats are snooze-worthy remains to be seen. But patrons can test the concept, for free.

The Beacon has demonstration seats in its lobby, which are also tied to a contest that starts next Friday.

"We want to keep people in the loop and as entertained as we can while we have a limited ability to show films," Shulman said.

Customers can win movie tickets if they take a selfie in the seats and email it to the Beacon.

Winners will be announced monthly on the Beacon's pre-movie slide show, social media and a promotional website.

In addition, scratch-off tickets will also be given away to customers with a chance at winning free or discounted movie tickets.

Customers can also enter a drawing for its grand prize: A weekend trip for two people to San Juan, Puerto Rico, flight and hotel accommodations included.

The \$23 million renovation of the Kinnell-Kresge building eight years ago by developer Richard Stanley brought first-run films, shown on an all digital system, to the downtown.

Its latest renovations are expected to take about three months and will be done in stages. Shulman said the construction schedule, and number of theaters closed at one time, is still being determined.

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