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Beacon Cinema beckons with new reclining seats

BY JOHN TOWNES

The seating at The Beacon Cinema will become more homelike in the next few months.

The six-screen movie house at 57 North St. in downtown Pittsfield is starting a conversion project to replace its existing traditional theater seats with lush mechanical recliners that can be adjusted to different angles for comfort.

"They're like the comfortable mechanical recliners that people want in their living rooms," said theater manager Lydia Shulman.

The VIP-brand seats will be separated by adjustable armrests that can be raised or lowered, depending on the customer's preferred level of coziness with the occupant of the neighboring seat. The Beacon's promotional material describes it as "The Loveseat Experience."

Shulman said that The Beacon selected a top-of-the-line model for the conversion project. "The fact that their position can be adjusted automatically is a major advantage, because not everyone can push recliners up and down physically," she noted.

The conversion is slated to begin in July and will take about 12 weeks to complete. The work will be conducted in phases.

"We'll continue to be open during the project, but we will shut down two or three individual theaters at a time to do the work on them," said Shulman.

She added that the theaters will also be modified in other ways, including new flooring.

The Beacon, which opened in 2009, is located on two floors of a prominent historic downtown commercial block that was redeveloped by Richard Stanley of Great Barrington, who owns and operates the movie house. The block is considered one of the



This promotional photo from the manufacturer shows the model of reclining seats that will be installed at The Beacon Cinema over the next few months. Among other features, the seats have armrests that can be raised to provide what the company describes as "The Loveseat Experience." The downtown Pittsfield movie theater is planning several promotions this summer to coincide with the conversion project.

anchors in downtown revitalization efforts.

Stanley, who also owns the Triplex Cinema in Great Barrington, is investing approximately \$500,000 in the seating project.

Stanley said the change is a straightforward response to competitive pressures. Regal Cinemas, a multiplex at the Berkshire Mall in Lanesboro, installed recliners about two years ago, and its business increased while attendance at The Beacon simultaneously declined.

"It's been demonstrated that the audience in The Beacon's market wants recliners, so that's what we're offering," said Stanley.

The enhanced seating is also a response to a larger form of competition that theaters face from home entertainment systems, in an era when it is possible to watch recent movies in the comfort of the living room on large high-definition screens with surround-sound.

In response, cinema operators have adopted various strategies to entice customers to leave their homes to attend movies. In addition to technical lures such as 3D, these have included amenities such as reserved seating, in-theater dining options and the opportunity to enjoy alcoholic beverages with the show.

Initially, the business math on the conversion to recliners may seem counter-intuitive. Because they are larger, recliners require a trade-off by significantly reducing the number of seats.

The Beacon, for example, will go from its present 800 seats down to 350 seats, while pricing will remain the same.

"However, theaters have found that having fewer seats ultimately makes for more customers," said Shulman.

She noted that the results at some theaters have been dramatic. She cited a theater in Chestnut Hill, near Boston, that installed recliners in conjunction with an overall remodeling and saw a major jump in attendance.

"It went from being the lowest grossing theater in that region to being the highest grossing," she said.

The Beacon is sponsoring a series of contests to promote the change and to compensate customers for the inconvenience during the construction.

"We've also set up a website (bigbeaconseats.com) to keep people informed of the progress as the work proceeds," said Shulman.

To showcase the new seating, a demonstration recliner is being set up in the lobby. Customers are encouraged to sit in the seat,

take a "selfie" photo of themselves, and email the picture to The Beacon to be entered into a raffle for monthly prizes of 10 free tickets.

In addition, The Beacon will give out scratch tickets to patrons with prizes such as free or discounted tickets that can be used once the new seating is in place.

There will also be a Grand Prize of a weekend for two in San Juan, Puerto Rico, with hotel and airfare included. The winner will be selected from participants in the Selfie or Scratch Card promotions.

Even as movie theaters introduce new amenities to entice customers, Shulman believes the core experience of moviegoing will continue to have a primal appeal that transcends the shape of seats and other accoutrements.

"People want to be in a community and they still appreciate the experience of going out and watching movies with other people," she said. "I don't think that's going to change." ♦

Annie Selke's products get dual showcase in Lenox

BY JOHN TOWNES

The Annie Selke Companies is branching out into the hospitality business and also establishing a retail presence in Lenox this summer.

The Pittsfield-based business is currently remodeling a historic home at 33 Main St. in the town center. It is slated to open in August as an upscale eight-room inn, which the company describes as "an Annie Selke luxury lodging experience."

Meanwhile, in early June it also opened a 720-square-foot retail shop almost directly across the street at 36 Main St.

The inn, which is named 33 Main, and the shop both showcase products in the company's catalog, including bedding, rugs, jewelry, tabletop, storage, decorative items, art and more.

"We are really creating a brand immersion experience by furnishing 33 Main with products that we design and sell," said Selke, a Stockbridge native who lives in Lenox and has a home in Palm Desert, Calif. "Crossing over into hospitality offers consumers a new and different way to experience the brand."

The Annie Selke Companies is comprised of several brands created and operated by Selke. Its corporate headquarters are based in a mill on Pecks Road in Pittsfield.

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