

The Berkshire Eagle

Recliners, new pricing make Beacon Cinema more inviting



Mayor Linda Tyer reclines in the new spacious seating at the Beacon Cinema in Pittsfield during Friday's unveiling of the theater's renovations. In the front row, from left, are Tyer, City Councilor John Krol, Cheryl Mirer of Downtown Pittsfield Inc., author Ty Allan Jackson, Kelley Vickery, artistic director of Berkshire International film Festival and Laura Palmer, executive director of Berkshire International Film Festival. BEN GARVER - THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

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By Tony Dobrowolski, The Berkshire Eagle

PITTSFIELD — When the \$23 million Beacon Cinema opened just over eight years ago, each of its six theaters were equipped with stadium, or tiered, seating, which was considered state-of-the-art at the time.

On Friday, a row of those seats had been placed along a wall in the Beacon's lobby. They looked like artifacts on display in a museum.

Over the last 18 months, the Beacon has replaced all of its stadium seating with recliner seats, part of a massive renovation project that also includes new carpeting, new lighting, and revamped pricing and ticket policies, all designed to keep the downtown theater complex competitive in a constantly changing marketplace.

Those changes were formally introduced at the theater Friday morning. Mayor Linda

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M. Tyer cut a red ribbon that had been placed over one of the new reclining seats, as several people in attendance "lounged" in them.

The Beacon has lowered its ticket prices dramatically for all shows every day, a policy that officially went into effect on Friday. The cost of a regular adult seat for a non-3D movie during evening hours is now \$8.75; all matinee tickets are \$6. The addition of touch screens at the Beacon's ticket counter will allow patrons to choose their own seats.

"This project started because we really wanted to do something to make Pittsfield go," said the Beacon's general manager, John Valente, referring back to when the theater opened on North Street in November 2009. "We've never lost that. That's why we're here today to showcase our new stuff."

Mayor Linda M. Tyer, who was a member of the City Council when the Beacon opened, referred to Friday's event as "really another great moment for downtown Pittsfield."

"We always believed that the Beacon would be the cornerstone of downtown Pittsfield," she said. "How many old New England downtowns have an independent theater? Not very many; but Pittsfield does."



John Valente, retired manager of the Beacon Cinema in Pittsfield, was on hand Friday for the unveiling of a \$550,000 renovation of the theater.

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Ward 6 Councilor John Krol, who was an assistant to former Mayor James M. Ruberto when the Beacon opened, recalled the difficulties the project faced before it was finally built.

"Today we can look at a change in the movie-going marketplace once again," he said.

Between planning and construction, the entire renovation project took about 18 months to complete, said the Beacon's manager, Lydia Shulman. The Beacon isn't the first Berkshire cinema to offer reclining seats — Regal Cinemas at the Berkshire Mall in Lanesborough also did so in 2015. At the Beacon, each of the six theaters was closed one-by-one over a period of four to six weeks so all the seats could be replaced.



Just in time for the holidays, the Beacon Cinema on Friday unveiled new lounge seating throughout the entire theater.

The original construction of the Beacon was funded through a private-public partnership, The new renovations were funded privately, Shulman said, but were made possible when the city of Pittsfield agreed to extend the theater's original Tax Increment Financing agreement for an additional five years, city officials said Friday.

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The project, which cost about \$550,000, was financed by Berkshire Bank, part of the consortium of local financial institutions that funded the Beacon's original construction.

Replacing the stadium seating with recliners drastically reduced the Beacon's total seating capacity from 750 seats to 301, but officials said the changes have been embraced by the public, and that theaters across the country that have undergone similar renovations have improved their attendance.

"I did some research myself about two years ago when people were concerned that dropping the seat count would be a problem," Shulman said. "You would think that by cutting seats you wouldn't have as many tickets, but it's been the exact opposite."

"Back in the day awhile ago, the experience was the sound being into the movie," she said. "This is the new thing (for patrons) to experience. They want comfort. They want their own little spaces.

"It changes the game."

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