

# The City of North Bend

## *A Century of Celebration: Enhance and Expand the Historic Liberty Theatre*

Over the last three decades, all of Coos County has been experiencing the realignment of economic conditions. Large industrial employers have given way to entrepreneurs and small employers catering to the tourism and hospitality industries. This has also incentivized towns like North Bend to revitalize their historic downtown core areas, primarily filled with storefronts and shops that date back 50 years or more. Unlike the large brand-name stores outside the downtown core, these older storefronts provide affordable space for restaurants, art galleries, and small retailers. The City of North Bend recognized the potential of this area as a way to further the vitality of the area. It adopted several strategies, including a master plan to promote an interface between the waterfront area (home of the Mill Casino) and the historic downtown core. Another strategy adopted by the City has been to revitalize and celebrate the historic nature of the downtown buildings by providing façade grants to stimulate investment in redevelopment. The City has acknowledged the landmark Liberty Theatre as a focal point of this downtown redevelopment, as evidenced by a clear statement in the City Council's recent goal-setting process, which identified one of three key economic development strategies as "continue to partner with the LTOB on their redevelopment." Another vital piece of evidence on the importance of the historic Liberty Theatre in the City's economic development strategy can be seen in the decision by the North Bend Urban Renewal Agency to commit more than \$527,500 towards supporting the restoration and enhancement of the Liberty Theatre.

The Little Theatre on the Bay (LTOB) is a non-profit organization whose mission is "*to cultivate the arts in Coos County.*" Since 1959, the LTOB has operated and managed North Bend's historic Liberty Theatre as a performing arts venue serving residents and visitors to Coos County. While the theatre is prominently located and provides a wide array of amenities, it also includes several spatial and technical constraints that impact the range and frequency of performances and the audience experience. After exploring numerous options ranging from minimal enhancements of the existing theatre to re-location, the LTOB Board agreed that they would engage the community to raise the funds necessary to enhance and expand the historic theatre. In 2015, the LTOB Restoration Committee was tasked with developing a capital improvement strategy and associated fundraising plan to upgrade the theatre while honoring and protecting its historic nature. To complete this task, the Restoration Committee conducted community outreach, engaged the services of skilled consultants, and invested hundreds of hours in formulating a plan. As a result of this effort, in 2016, LTOB launched *A Century of Celebration: A Campaign to Expand and Enhance the Historic Liberty Theatre*. This capital campaign plan has been divided into eight phases with action steps designed to ensure North Bend's historic Liberty Theatre's role as the architectural and cultural hub of the community has been preserved and protected in time for the centennial celebration of the building's opening scheduled for spring 2024.

A fundamental element of the LTOB is to ensure the theatre continues to be a welcoming and inviting place for the entire community. As Oregon's second-longest continuously operating community theatre, the LTOB believes that everyone is likely to be a patron, a volunteer, and an active participant in the performing arts at some time in their lives. As such, the LTOB has incorporated a number of specific enhancement elements into the Century of Celebration campaign designed to empower and entice all community members to participate in programs at the Liberty Theatre.

Completed features such as installing ADA restrooms, eliminating pinch points in the lobby, and creating parking pads in the auditorium are all designed to enhance accessibility for patrons. Likewise, installing separate restrooms and breakout dressing rooms in the backstage area facilitates the involvement of intergenerational casts and crews to work on performances. The hearing loop system which is part of Phase V of the capital campaign is designed to make sure that individuals with hearing challenges can still enjoy the solos and full-cast show stoppers that are prominent in musical theatre. Finally, upgrades to the interior air circulation/filtration in the theatre address a concern of patrons and performers alike by ensuring that air quality at the theatre is never a disqualifying factor to anyone. Through these improvements along with the long-standing commitment of the LTOB to engage and empower the community, the more than 10,000 patrons, volunteers, and performers who come to the Liberty Theatre year after year are honored and celebrated in the tradition of hometown theatre.

The LTOB and the Liberty Theatre are fundamental contributors to the economic vitality of the greater Coos Bay/North Bend area. The Executive Director and Board of the North Bend Urban Renewal Agency has provided an unwavering endorsement of the LTOB's importance to downtown businesses and the community. As further evidence of the significance of the Liberty Theatre to the economic and social fabric of the community, the URA awarded the LTOB a \$527,500 challenge grant to be used towards the renovation, restoration, and expansion of the Liberty Theatre. While the NBURA's grant allows incremental draw-downs, the goal was for the LTOB to use the funds across the initial seven phases and not expended on any single project element. This allowed the LTOB to leverage the seed money for more than \$3.5 million in matching grants.

Americans for the Arts has been producing regular studies documenting the overall economic impact of arts and cultural organizations in a community. As part of this research, they have developed a "calculator" that allows organizations to estimate the economic impact of their specific programs and activities. Utilizing this calculator, at the beginning of the capital campaign, the Liberty Theatre generated an annual economic impact of about \$300,000 and directly contributed to creating or sustaining 7.5 FTE jobs in the community. However, completion of this project in conjunction with the remaining phases of the historic Liberty Theatre capital campaign is designed to produce a minimum of 25 percent overall increase in annual audience levels. The American for the Arts calculator reveals that this level of growth would nearly double the economic impact and jobs created/sustained.

Finally, permanently addressing the building's myriad of spatial and technical limitations will also impact the theatre's viability to continue attracting out-of-town visitors, including the growing bus tour market. Based on ticket sales information, LTOB estimated that more than nine percent of their audience members come from outside the county. At audience levels of 15,000, this would equate to more than 1,350 audience members coming from outside the area. Since most programs at the Liberty Theatre take place in the evening, the preponderance of these would likely spend the night in the North Bend/Coos Bay area. According to the Oregon Tourism Commission, overnight visitors spend, on average, nearly three times more than day visitors (Oregon Travel Impacts – Runyan 2018).

This project is consistent and reflects the commitment to local objectives. From its prominent location, the LTOB Board quickly recognized the power of the theatre to support area businesses and attract visitors to the area. In April 2015, URA Executive Director acknowledged the economic importance of the LTOB and the Liberty Theatre by stating, "*the City of North Bend believes strongly that the LTOB and the vitality and energy their productions bring to the downtown are integral to extending the hours of activity in downtown as well as expanding business opportunities to many restaurants and shops in the area.*" The local cast and audience members bolster this economic vitality

created by the LTOB that the City Administrator discusses. It reflects the LTOB's reputation as a regional attraction as well. Each year visitors from across the region come to see shows and be entertained at the Liberty. Accordingly, the primary geographical area served by the LTOB incorporates 155 miles of the southern Oregon coast from Florence to Brookings. It extends 100 miles east to include Eugene, Roseburg, and Medford. In fact, during the summer season as well as around Christmas, it is not unusual for tour groups from Roseburg, Medford, or Eugene to bring busloads of people to the Coos Bay/North Bend community to shop, see the sites, and enjoy a performance at the historic Liberty Theatre. As such, the theatre is not only contributing to the summer tourism season. However, it is an integral part of building shoulder-season tourism as well.

This project is consistent and supportive of the Oregon Coast RCTP Plan for 2019-2020. Specifically, enhancement of the Liberty Theatre as a performing arts venue can expand shoulder-season tourism, which 83% of South Coast respondents to the stakeholder feedback element of the planning process identified as a "high" or "very high" priority and is reflected in Goal 1 of the RCTP. Likewise, this project is consistent with the 71% of South Coast respondents that identified "improve curb appeal of main streets and city centers" as a top priority. Finally, this project is leveraging a wide range of local donations, private foundation grants, and local, county, and state funding to enhance and expand access to the arts. This is consistent with Goal 4 of the RCTP, "align investment in public art..."

- Phase I (2015) - Completed - Exterior Façade Repair and Restoration
- Phase II (2016-17) - Completed - ADA Restrooms and New Seats
- Phase III (2017-18) - Completed - Upgrade Lobby and Concession Area
- Phase IV (2018-21) - Completed - Set Workshop Area and New Green Room
- Phase V (2020-21) - Completed - LED Stage Lighting Upgrades & Hearing Loop System, Box office, Mezzanine remodels
- Phase VI (2021-22) - Completed - Historic Preservation-New Roof with Rooftop Domes
- Phase VII (2022-23) - Fundraising; Begin Construction Feb 2023 - Youth Program Center/Rehearsal Space and New Dressing Rooms
- Phase VIII (2024) - In Progress - Neon Blade Sign and Marquee to light up the night!

**Donors:** Over 650 unique community donors and 30 public and private grant foundations have contributed.

**Costs:** Over \$3.5 million has been raised to support the Liberty Theatre restoration project.

**Ticket Sales:** Before this project started, ticket sales for the 2013-14 season were 5,674. During the entire last season (before Covid) in 2018-19, ticket sales were 11,543, over a 100% increase.

**Volunteers:** Over 500 people generally volunteer in some capacity, whether on stage or behind the scenes. This fell dramatically during Covid as the doors were closed, and audiences started returning more significantly as the theatre re-opens for live events.

Along with restoring the building, the goals of this restoration include accessibility for cast, crew, and patrons, increased youth participation, partnerships with schools, and downtown economic development. Over \$3.5 million have already been raised in support of the first six phases of this restoration effort.

Earlier this year, the URA made application to the Main Street Revitalization Grant Program and was awarded \$122,364 toward replacing the LTOB's 24-foot neon blade sign, auditorium interior main stage flame-resistant curtain, and making repairs to concrete sidewalks abutting the theatre.

Ciccarelli's is an example of what once was a thriving coffee shop that shuttered its doors when the Liberty Theatre shut down because of the pandemic. The Liberty Theatre has worked to restore and renovate its historic building. The proposed Main Street Revitalization Grant project will position the performing arts venue as the iconic foothold at the southern entrance to our downtown. Nonprofit theatres operate within the economic ecosystem of any given community; as production season draws crowds to the area, it supports jobs and brings business to local restaurants, bars, hotels, etc. Over the past 73 years, the Little Theatre on the Bay (LTOB) has enjoyed numerous sold-out shows, entertained countless audience members, and nurtured the talents of actors, directors, and technicians of all ages. Operating as an all-volunteer organization, the LTOB has been able to sustain operations, purchase the Liberty Theatre and enhance and expand this downtown landmark.

From local restaurateur Ian Ciccarelli, "Since the upgrades are done at the Theatre, Ciccarelli's knows when it is 'theatre night,' not just because of the giant white reader board displaying the events that are taking place. Our restaurant's reservation list is booked solid. The norm is reservation only, no walk-ins, just a few people lucky enough to find a spot at the bar to enjoy a meal and a glass of wine. The revitalization of Liberty Theatre has not only impacted my business. However, it allows the community to get together and embrace the natural talents of groups and individuals that make up our community."

## **PROJECT PHOTOS:**



