

Local News

Colonial Theater charts its course for the next century

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BETHLEHEM—A vast array of improvements to the Colonial Theater aim to put it on a path to another full century of brilliant artistic life. The Next Century capital improvement plan is plunging toward its end goal—a fully refurbished, first-class cultural center in the heart of Bethlehem and northern New Hampshire.

“This project has significantly raised the bar for rural arts philanthropy in New Hampshire,” said executive director Steven Dignazio, who added that the success was “a testament to an unprecedented level of community support and participation.”

While the modern Colonial dates to 2001, the theater has existed for over one hundred years: hence the sense of centennial, and the consciousness of the need to plan for the ‘next century.’

The initial budget

was an eye-popping \$640,000, later expanded to a grand design of \$800,000. The vast network of committed members, loyal patrons, and generous donors did not disappoint: the latest totals stand at \$755,000. The largest portion (\$290,000) represents private donors of all sizes, a testament to the broad base of support the Colonial enjoys after its nearly two decades of progress and service to the surrounding communities. The rest is divided between corporate (\$256,000) foundations (\$159,000) and an unprecedentedly successful crowdfunding campaign that raked in \$53,000, much of it from young, first-time donors.

As of late 2017, the first two phases had been successfully completed, with the last scheduled for the winter of 2017/18.

Phase one included a number of back-stage spaces for performers, many of whom have

strict requirements for preparation space in their contracts. Never again will a star performer—such as comedian Paula Poundstone—have to cut in line at the public restrooms before an act. Instead, the new green room, dressing room, and secure storage space will allow the Colonial to meet the most demanding expectations of top-flight talent (though it should be noted that Ms. Poundstone took the experience in good humor).

The next stage focused on improving the performance space itself, including new carpet, fresh paint, seat renovations, and improved ventilation. Safety has also been bolstered, with artist entry and exit points. The performances themselves now enjoy new lighting backdrops, a refinished stage floor, and a significant jump in sound system quality.

The final stage will invest in the theaters annexes—east wing renovations will include

bathrooms, fire safety upgrades, and a year-round office for executive director Dignazio, who has run the Colonial from his house for years.

Throughout all of this upheaval and improvement, the Colonial is proud to have stayed open and, as they say, ‘on-mission’. Only once in the 2015 and 2016 seasons did the theater go dark, and management reports that the improvements have already born fruit during the 2017 season.

Capital campaign co-chair and former 9-year board member Mary Lou Krambeer helps nonprofits develop themselves for a living, but her passion is north country arts. She explained that any nonprofit idea—artistic, charitable, educational—needs a strong vision for a seed, and a steady track record of success to spur ‘investment’ in time, energy, and yes, money. A good idea—if it wants to be-

come a good reality—has to attract talented people, which typically involves proving its viability over time.

By growing steadily from its first year, when the marquis collapsed under snow, the Colonial has logged exactly the kind of record that attracts loyalty, talent, and passion, Krambeer said.

Director Dignazio said that the theater has funded its rapid growth “one thank-you note at a time,” and praised the recurring generosity of its members, and the passion of its patrons. The Colonial’s annual membership has grown from 150 to more than 500 in the past decade alone.

Local partnerships will remain a critical piece of the Colonial’s role, from the Bethlehem Hebrew Congregation’s annual film series, to school and library trips, to work with the Ammonoosuc Conservation Trust and

Tri-County Community Action Program.

“There’s no audience you can write off,” Dignazio explained, while acknowledging that there is “a certain limit to growth” that the theater may be approaching. That’s not a bad thing, he said, and represents the increasingly mature character of the Colonial.

In an average year, the Colonial makes the majority (60 percent) of its revenue from ‘earned’ income—tickets, advertising, membership dues, and theater rentals. The rest comes from various grants, donations, sponsorship, and fundraisers, such as the annual golf tournament. The Colonial is, and will remain, a community project.

Dignazio tied the Colonial’s success to that of Bethlehem—and vice versa, observing, “We’ve gone from being the middle of nowhere, to being the middle of somewhere.”