

The Rowland Theatre observed a milestone on April 22, which is not a milestone anyone is celebrating.

Day 36 since the theatre had last shown a movie came and went. Five weeks and a day. The theatre stopped showing movies when Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolfe strongly advised the closure of non-essential business. The mandated order came about a week later.

This is not the first time the theatre closed due to a pandemic. The theatre was ordered to close its doors for five weeks during the Spanish Influenza outbreak of 1918.

“We’ve been doing the count-up on our digital sign,” said Rowland Board member Rebecca Inlow. “In the back of my head, when we started doing this, I didn’t think we would surpass the 1918 closure.”

While the lights are dark outside the theatre these days, the promise of the future is very evident inside the 103-year-old non-profit playhouse.

Theatre manager Kevin Conklin does not know how to sit idle. His volunteer title of manager also includes the job description of volunteer electrician, custodian and construction worker. He has been putting all of those descriptions to good use at the theatre during this past month.

Much of the work, including wiring and lighting, will go unnoticed. A few of his other projects, including re-tiling the men’s restroom, will be a welcome sight upon the theatre’s reopening.

One other very large project actually was put into motion earlier this year, before anyone would ever dream of the magnitude of this pandemic.

In early 2020, Manager Conklin placed the order and deposit for 202 new seats for the lower balcony. This is the first step in a project to replace the seats in the lower balcony and on the main auditorium floor.

“This project has been needed for years,” he said, noting the poor condition of the current seats, many of which have stuffing and springs coming out of them.

Inlow reiterates the need for new seats.

“The board has recognized the importance of this project if we want to remain a viable place for people to view a movie or come to see a show. We honestly believe this could be key to our survival. We think having new seats will bring more people into our theatre and into our town.”

The new seat will be comfortable and is larger than the current seats, but it is also a historic-looking seat, which will be compatible with the original seats from 1917 in the upper balcony. The original seats will remain.

The scope of the project will involve more than seat replacement. The concrete auditorium floor is pitted, cold and very difficult to clean, Inlow said. If the board can reach its goal of fund-raising, the project will include a new floor in the auditorium when enough funds are raised to replace the seats there.

The board knows its success lies in taking things one step at a time. The project will begin in the lower balcony.

Conklin said he hopes that work on lower balcony will take place in September.

Irwin Seating Co., which is making the seats, has currently stopped manufacturing seats and is making masks for first responders and others. The seat factory is located in Michigan, and there is a manufacturing shut-down there until April 30. However, all parties involved are optimistic for a fall start time at the theatre.

The cost to tear out the old seats, repair the balcony floor and install new seats there will be close to \$100,000. The cost estimate for the main auditorium is approximately \$250,000.

Looking at the total project cost, this will equate overall to about \$500/seat.

When the seat order was placed, with plans to begin the fund-raising in earnest, no one imagined what the next few months would hold. But, the Rowland Theatre is a story of perseverance, and the board believes this particular dream can become a reality.

A special event happening in early May could provide a big boost in helping the theatre reach its goal for the seats.

The Rowland Theatre will be taking part in Centre Gives, the Centre Foundation's online-giving campaign designed to support local nonprofits of Centre County. The 36-hour event will begin on May 12 at 9 p.m. and conclude May 13 at 9 p.m.

Donations given through Centre Gives qualify the receiving organization for a share of a \$200,000 stretch pool and \$100,000 bonus pool.

"This is such a great event," Inlow said. "The theatre will receive all donations made toward it through this campaign, and each donation will give the theatre a larger share of the stretch pool." In essence, she said, each donation will be stretched further with the extra funds.

If anyone is considering making a donation for seats, or purchasing a seat, this would be a great way to kick off this project, Inlow said. The theatre will be posting the link to donate

through Centre Gives during the 36-hour campaign. The donations received through year's event will be put in the seating fund.

“Any donation – small or large – will make a difference.”

Another way the board plans to raise funds is to sell the seats that are being removed. If people are interested in purchasing old seats, they can contact the theatre at 814-342-0477.

Spring 2020 has been a season of roadblocks for all businesses, and the Rowland Theatre is trying to keep its eyes on the road. Two spring shows were postponed. Paragon Ragtime Orchestra has been rescheduled, at this point, for June 13. More details on the second show will be released once a new date has been confirmed.

The board had high hopes for a good movie season this spring with the release of several Disney movies and other big releases. Those releases were pulled, and along with that went the revenue for the theatre from the big movies.

Inlow has no idea right now what movies will be available from the studios when the theatre gets the green light to reopen, but there are good movie releases on the horizon. She said that, with its 1,000 seats, the theatre can provide social distancing for everyone, which is a definite plus. And people can be assured that the theatre will be diligent about cleaning.

“We look forward to seeing people return. You can't beat watching a movie with popcorn at the Rowland. And, best of all, we are working on making this a more comfortable experience from the bottom up,” she said with a smile, adding, “Pun intended.”