



Panida looks for community input on possible lobby changes

The board of directors of the Panida Theater are weighing out a decision about the town's treasured community theater – and are inviting feedback from all community members.

The decision is whether, or how, to make changes to the Panida lobby area to address multiple concerns arising from its crowded conditions during full-house events.

To that end, the Panida is hosting an open house on Saturday, January 11, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., with an exhibit of various plans for lobby improvements. Panida board members will be on hand to provide details and context for the different plans, which range from a no-changes option, to plans which would augment the lobby space with access to the theater's currently vacant northern retail space; or further, with a pass-through to the adjacent Little Theater.

"The bottom-line factor about any change for the lobby is to strictly maintain its historical character," said Panida Board President Sean Behm. "But assuming any change does adhere to its historical character – or can even return the lobby to its original functions – how can we best address the crowding that occurs in the lobby at sold-out performances?"

One big contributor to crowding in the lobby are the concession counters for snacks and drinks that patrons line up for. The lobby's concession stands are a more recent addition to the theater. In fact, when the Panida was built in 1927 during the era of vaudeville and silent movies, theaters didn't offer food and drink on site. Patrons would bring in snacks or drinks from nearby restaurants – if food and drink were even allowed in the performance space.

Nowadays, however, concessions are a critical revenue source for all theaters, including the Panida.

"So one big question is, how can we continue to offer and improve access by audiences to our food and drink concessions, while reducing the extreme crowding?" Behm asked.

Other goals with any lobby change are, if possible, to provide greater ingress and egress without blocking some of the foyer doors as the current concessions do; to uncover and feature the historical fountain in the lobby's eastern wall that's been obscured for decades; and to provide a more spacious and dramatic entryway to the theater, as audiences would have experienced in the 1920s when the Panida opened as the town's most luxurious performance space.

Behm said the theater board and staff have already held separate presentations of the different plans with Panida stakeholder and volunteer groups. The open house on Saturday is an opportunity for general public comment before the board considers a decision at its regular Feb. 6 meeting, which is also open to the public.

"We'd love to see a great turnout from the community to see these plans and give us feedback," said Behm.

Panida board agendas and meetings are available on the "About" page at www.panida.org.