

SEAN HILLER/MORE SAN PEDRO

Warner Grand will get central air, fund-raising efforts under way for seats

By Paul Clinton
MORE SAN PEDRO

To cool the Warner Grand Theatre's auditorium when it was built in 1931, theater workers dumped bags of ice down chutes leading to the basement. Large fans would then blow the cool air into ducts that led back up to small, box vents under the seats known as "mush-rooms." The theater's city owners are now replacing this antiquated cooling system, which has been inoperable for years, with modern central air.

In concert with that effort, which includes new heating, a nonprofit foundation launched a fund-raising campaign to reupholster the theater's 1,560 seats, add new speakers and replace the stage rigging for plays.

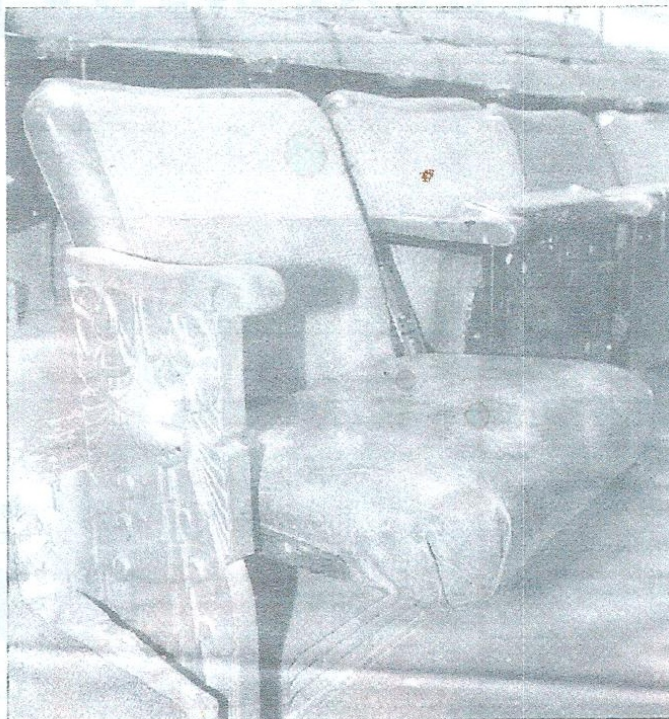
"It's like Christmas," said Lee Sweet, the theater's manager. "It's something we have been after for a long time ... It's going to make the experience of going to the Warner Grand much more pleasant."

Of late, parallel campaigns from the theater's city owners and local arts boosters have restarted efforts to improve the theater and restore its seats to 1930s-era vintage.

On June 11, members of Grand Vision Foundation, a nonprofit arts booster in San Pedro, unveiled their program to raise about \$650,000 to bring back original seats, replace crackling speakers and improve rigging needed to move scenic backgrounds during plays.

The Port of Los Angeles pledged \$300,000 to the project. Councilwoman Janice Hahn and other donors chipped in another \$40,000.

"I was so pleased to be able to find the funding to complete the air and heating system, and now it is time to renovate these seats, which no one would argue are comfortable," Hahn said. "The Warner Grand Theatre is one of San Pedro's historic treasures, and its renovation, which began in 1996 when it was purchased by



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the city, has been a priority to the community and to me."

The foundation is offering the seats at \$350 each, which nets the donor a plaque on the seat. Hahn has pledged \$1,000 for four seats.

The existing naugahyde seat coverings were installed in the 1980s, when primarily Spanish-language films played at the theater that was known as Teatro Juarez. Yellow, green and red seat coverings conveyed the colors on the Mexican flag.

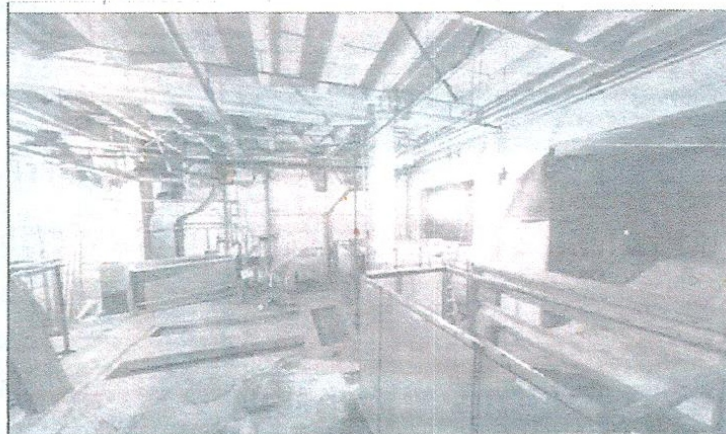
Grand Vision has hired a seat restorer to return the seats to their original pattern, when the Warner Grand first opened in the 1930s.

The seats' design will feature a teal and peach diamond-shaped pattern.

A group of seats will also be widened as part of the restoration, said Liz Schindler-Johnson, the group's president.

"We're going to have a much more comfortable theater," Schindler-Johnson said.

In May, the city's Cultural Affairs Department launched a



The Warner Grand Theatre's basement is cleared to make way to install a modern heating and air conditioning system.

long-delayed installation of a modern heating and air-conditioning system at the Warner Grand. Work began in May.

The system is expected to be fully installed by Nov. 1, said Ray Kaufman, the theater's house manager. Workers replaced the theater's ancient furnace that has not worked since the 1980s.

To pay for the city's work, Hahn pushed for funds from the city's alterations and improvements fund.

About half of the project's \$630,000 budget also came from a blend of state and federal transportation funds.

Hahn secured the money from the state's gas tax fund that's used to improve aging city facilities.