



Left, the Lebanon Opera House theater before the renovations had a wooden floor, lots of echoes, and little legroom. Right, LOH prioritized comfort and accessibility in the theater, decreasing the seating capacity from 803 seats to 743 to include wider seats, more ADA seating, and cup holders.

Photos Courtesy of LOH

Lebanon Opera House ready to reopen after facelift

'The renovations have gone from the front door all the way to the back, touching [every] aspect of the building'

By **Lauren Dorsey**
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After five months of renovations, the Lebanon Opera House (LOH) is reopening its doors on Feb. 7, two months into the organization's centennial year. LOH has retained its basic footprint throughout the project, as the work, though extensive, has focused primarily on furnishing and fixtures. "The renovations have gone from the front door all the way to the back, touching [every] aspect of the building," said Joe Clifford, the LOH executive director. "This is really the beginning of the 100th-year celebrations for us."

LOH is an independent nonprofit, but the organization does not have its own building. Instead, LOH is in, and has now renovated, part of the Lebanon, New Hampshire City Hall. "There were no tax dollars put into this project," said

Clifford. "What I think is really special about this is that we instigated the change, we have raised the funds, and we're doing the work, and at the end of the day, this is the city's space, so we're adding value to downtown Lebanon."

To ensure that their renovations aligned with the goals of the town, LOH has been in close communication with the city manager throughout the projects. "We kept him apprised of the executive-level changes and general concepts," said Clifford. "But we did have a lot of leeway and agency to make the space our own." They've also run their designs past the superintendent of facilities, who has worked to emphasize practicality and maintenance feasibility in their design choices. "It's been a lot of very transparent conversation and a really lovely partnership," said Clifford.

One of the most striking

changes in the wake of the renovations, according to Clifford, is the transformation of the front lobby. LOH has added new paint, custom lighting, new flooring, and tiles to the space. Because the lobby has created echoes in the past, LOH also installed sound attenuation material in the room's ceiling to help dampen the noise. "It now feels more like a proper theater entrance," said Clifford. "And I think it fits in well with City Hall. We can't forget that we're just one part of this bigger building, and so we made it a space where you would be equally at home coming to a show, paying your tax bill, or getting your dog license."

LOH also overhauled its box office. "Before, we had these little slider doors," said Clifford. "Now the whole space has been replaced by a wide-open gorgeous marble countertop." LOH will be using the counter to sell tickets, drinks, and light

food. Bands who perform at the venue will also be able to sell their merchandise from the same area.

The lobby is far from the only part of the facility the renovations touched. LOH made significant changes to its theater. During the construction, they reduced their seating capacity from 803 to 743, opting for wider seats with more legroom and cup holders, which will help the space accommodate LOH's new beverage service. "It was a strategic move. [I] think comfort really trumps capacity," said Clifford.

The new seating also prioritizes accessibility. In addition to more ADA-accessible seating near the front of the stage, LOH created two rows of removable seats in the orchestra. "It is giving us the ability to be flexible with how we use the space. So if we don't need to sell those seats, it can be a dance space or a reception area," said Clifford. "The modular seating plan also allows for even more wheelchair access at the back of the house."

Closer to the stage, LOH overhauled the lighting. "It's now 150 different lighting instruments, with LEDs," said Clifford. "It's always hard to describe the impacts of that project, but you'll know it when you see it." Finally, LOH spent significant time improving the backstage areas, in an effort to make it a more comfortable and welcoming area for performers at the venue.

To celebrate the end of the construction, LOH is hosting a housewarming party on Wednesday, February 7.

During the event, visitors can take a self-guided tour to see the largest changes, while LOH board members and staff will be available to talk about the project in more detail. "All throughout, DJ Sean will be playing music, and we'll have a lot of food and beverages," said



Joe Clifford, the executive director of the Lebanon Opera House, has been planning the recent renovations since he joined the organization in 2017.

Courtesy of LOH

Clifford. "People can come for five minutes or stay for two hours."

Following the reopening, LOH has a full calendar of events planned to inaugurate the new space. "I'm particularly excited about the drag artist Sasha Velour, who is coming on March 4," said Clifford. Velour is a graduate of the Center for Cartoon Studies in White River Junction but has since made it big on the global stage.

They won season nine of RuPaul's Drag Race and have gone on to do performances around the world. "They have exploded like an international superstar," said Clifford. "I jumped at the chance, especially early in the reopening, to bring in Sasha's show. Given what's

going on politically, I felt like it was a really important statement, but also the show is going to be so fun. It's just gonna be like a real party vibe."

Looking ahead, Clifford emphasized that the renovations only represent the beginning of LOH's planned centennial celebration. "The building might be done or nearly done, but we're not done," said Clifford. "The campaign continues on and what's next for us is to really build out our on-location program."

Hoping to purchase new mobile sound systems, box offices, and lights, LOH plans to expand its ability to host events at other venues, like parks, churches, and town halls. This is an effort LOH has already partly begun through its annual Nexus Festival, which is three days of free performances on multiple stages around downtown Lebanon.

"Any location can become a pop-up performance space," said Clifford. "Our audiences are not always able to get to us. [These mobile performances] are going out and meeting our audiences halfway. I think that's really important." The flexibility in spaces will also allow LOH to start bringing in a more diverse array of artists and performers who might not have been well-suited to the LOH main stage. "The work really continues," said Clifford. "We're more than just four walls."



In the lobby, LOH added new flooring, tiles, an open box office, and custom lighting fixtures.

Courtesy of LOH

