

Historic Theater Grant Program



Photos, top to Bottom: Capitol Theater, Yakima;
Alpine Theater, Colville; 7th Street Theater, Hoquiam;
Mt. Baker Theater, Bellingham

Background

In 2008, the Washington State Legislature provided funding for a capital needs assessment of historic theaters across the state. The study, conducted through the Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation, examined over 80 theaters across the state built in 1957 or before (over 50 years old at the time) to determine issues such as required safety improvements, building system deterioration, deferred maintenance, accessibility challenges, and other code compliance issues. The physical needs identified in the survey at that time totaled nearly \$38 million (\$46 million in 2020 dollars when adjusted for inflation).

Issue

Theaters across the state have been devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic, essentially forced to go dark for most of 2020 and all of 2021 to date. With no revenue, theater operators are unable to implement critical capital projects, leading to deferred maintenance. Nearly 70% of historic theaters are located in rural jurisdictions with populations less than 50,000, and over half are in economically distressed counties. Creation of a grant program would have a direct impact on rural and distressed communities. State investment in these community beacons is imperative to promoting public mental health and supporting ongoing job creation and employment.

Benefits

Creation of a matching grant program within the Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation to support rehabilitation of historic theaters would have the following impact:

- Support important community icons in historic downtowns, including many Main Street districts
- Historic rehabilitation projects are labor intensive, requiring local contractors and suppliers.
- Being truly 'local' projects, project expenditures in the form of wages, sales tax, etc, remain in the local economy.
- Rehabilitation work focuses on preservation and restoration of key architectural features, retaining those elements that make theaters unique building types.

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The Governor's proposed Capital Budget includes **\$515,000** in funding to create the Historic Theater Grant program in the 2021-23 biennium. **The Washington Trust strongly supports this proposal and requests increasing funding to \$1,000,000 given the tremendous need facing historic theaters.**