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**ROBINSON CENTER STARTS SECOND ACT  
RENOVATIONS BEGIN FOR ARKANSAS'S PREMIER PERFORMING ARTS FACILITY**

**LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (July 1, 2014)** – Today marks the official closing of Robinson Center for a major renovation and expansion. The Historic Robinson Auditorium has long been a landmark in Central Arkansas. Construction of the Joseph T. Robinson Memorial Auditorium began in 1937 and officially opened in December, 1939. The structure was a WPA (Works Progress Administration) project, and is an excellent example of the Art Deco style architecture of the time. The building was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2007. The facility is owned by the City of Little Rock and managed by the Little Rock Convention & Visitors Bureau.

City officials, members of the Little Rock Advertising and Promotion Commission (LRA&P), the Little Rock Convention & Visitors Bureau (LRCVB) and members of the design and construction teams were on hand to celebrate the construction kick-off.

The renovation plans have been in the works since 2011, when the LRA&P empanelled a concept team to evaluate all aspects of the existing facility, research user needs, propose conceptual solutions and estimate the cost and construction schedule of the proposed additions and renovations. The team also evaluated the viability of renovating the existing building versus building a new structure. The final decision to renovate, restore and expand the existing structure was based on the historic significance of the building as well as cost savings with utilizing the existing building exterior. "Much time and consideration went into this project's proposed redesign to help ensure that the project would combine historic preservation, sustainable design and financial stewardship," stated Gretchen Hall, President and CEO of the LRCVB.

"You can't be a world-class city without a world-class performing arts center," added Hall, "...and as beloved as the Robinson Auditorium is, this 75 year-old building has unfortunately become functionally and mechanically obsolete." Little Rock Mayor, Mark Stodola added, "Through this renovation, the Robinson Center will become the easternmost anchor to Little Rock's burgeoning downtown creative corridor, and will help continue the revitalization and future growth of our city's entertainment district."

**Project Team:**

The design team is led by Polk Stanley Wilcox Architects of Little Rock and Ennead Architects of New York. Other firms included on the design team include, Schuler Shook theatrical consultants, Jaffe Holden acoustics; Engineering Consultants Inc.; TME Inc.; Tillotson Design Associates; McClelland Consulting Engineers; Landscape Architecture Inc.; Caradine Companies Architecture; and Venue Consultants.

CDI Contractors and Hunt Construction Group, who formed a joint venture, were selected as the General Contractors and Construction Managers.

### **Exterior Design Highlights:**

The exterior envelope of the existing building will undergo restoration, and additions will be constructed on the north and west sides to provide additional meeting, conference and service capabilities. The facility is expected to reopen as a LEED Certified structure.

By restoring the historic envelop of the building, the project's design combines the historic significance with a dramatic new modern addition that takes advantage of the building's unique location on the banks of the Arkansas River. To the west, and immediately adjacent, will be the new Broadway Bridge. No longer turning its back to the river, the Robinson Center will now have two faces to welcome those traveling from both the north and south.

### **Performance Hall Improvements:**

The new design will completely transform the performance hall; design highlights include:

- dropping the stage 36' to ground level in order to create more acoustic volume and height
- bringing the back of the hall forward, closer to the stage, in order to provide improved sight lines for all patrons
- adding a four-stage grid and a series of cat-walks for increased production capabilities
- the creation of two balcony levels with theater box seating along the side walls, creating a much more intimate feel to the hall
- adding a mechanical lift for the orchestra pit in order to allow the symphony and musical performances to be inside the audience chamber
- a new orchestra shell addition of adjustable acoustic panels to improve and adjust acoustics according to the hall's performance needs
- complete restoration of the historic lobby
- creation of a patron's lounge

### **Back of House Improvements:**

A complete reorganization of the back of house support areas will provide:

- increased loading capacity, with two truck bays on stage level
- increased support and staging areas for performers and show sets
- completely new electrical and mechanical systems
- improved and enhanced staging and lighting systems
- increased dressing and chorus room capacity, on stage level
- the creation of a back stage corridor and performers lounge

### **Visitor Experience & Accessibility Improvements:**

The visitor experience was also a critical component of the design development plans, improvements include:

- expanded restroom capacity

- a permanent box office
- additional monitors and technology throughout the facility
- increased ADA accessibility
- two new entrance vestibules from the adjoining parking garage
- improved signage and interior way-faring
- built in concession and merchandise areas
- new patron drop-off areas
- increased lobby space with visual connectivity for multiple building levels

### **Conference Center and Other Interior Improvements:**

One of the most dramatic improvements will be to the new conference center. The new design of the meeting and banquet facilities will be nothing short of miraculous. The addition on the north side of the building will allow groups to take advantage of, and enjoy, the beautiful river views, as well as provide adjoining lobbies and pre-function space with the adjacent DoubleTree Hotel. The new ballroom will accommodate up to 500 people for a seated banquet and flexible meeting space will be created on an upper level.

### **Renovation Project Timeline:**

The 1939 structure suffered from a wide array of deficiencies, including stage loading/unloading, acoustical insufficiency, dressing room access and inadequate wing space and storage within the performance hall. There were also structural, mechanical and electrical issues, poor public circulation and outdated conference center spaces existed within the facility.

Knowing the center was in need of major upgrades if the facility was to continue to serve Central Arkansas into the future, the Little Rock Advertising and Promotion Commission (LRA&P) empanelled a Robinson Center Concept Team in October, 2011. The group was tasked with evaluating all aspects of the existing facility, research user needs, propose conceptual solutions and estimate the cost and construction schedule of the proposed additions and renovations.

The concept team was led by Mike Steelman of SCM Architects, PLLC and also included representatives from WD&D Architects; Shuler Shook Theatre Planners; Jaffe-Holden Acoustical Consultants; TME Inc. Mechanical and Electrical Engineers; ECI Inc. Structural Engineers; McClelland Consulting Engineers Inc. Civil Engineers; East Harding Construction; HVS Consulting and Hunt Construction Group. In addition, stakeholder and tenant organizations representing the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra, Celebrity Attractions and the DoubleTree Hotel also participated in the planning. In addition to Mr. Steelman, Mayor Mark Stodola, Gretchen Hall and Jim Rice have served as the owner's representatives. The concept team findings were presented publicly on June 5, 2012.

On January 17, 2013 the LRA&P announced the selection of Polk Stanley Wilcox Architects, partnered with Ennead Architects, as the architectural and design team for the future renovations.

On March 28, 2013 CDI Contractors LLC, partnered with Hunt Construction Group, were selected by LRA&P as the General Contractors and Construction Managers.

On September 23, 2013 the final schematic renderings and cost estimates were presented publicly. The schematic plans depict major interior upgrades within the performance hall, including additional volume to create a two balcony setup, increased lobby space, acoustical improvements, theatrical upgrades, loading dock expansion, a larger stage area, and new dressing room facilities. In addition, an enhanced and modern ballroom and small conference center was unveiled. New technology, mechanical systems, and outdoor plaza spaces were also included in the presentation.

A special Little Rock election took place on Tuesday, December 10, 2013, asking citizens to dedicate the existing 2% A & P tax for the repayment of bonds to fund the renovations. The final vote tally reflected nearly 75 percent of voters were in support of dedicating these funds for the Robinson Auditorium restoration and expansion.

The municipal bonds were sold on Tuesday, June 17, 2014, generating \$68.9 million in total project funds. Final design development plans were presented on June 19. The renovation begins July 1, 2014 and is scheduled to take place over 26 months, with a grand re-opening in the fall of 2016.

### **History of Robinson Auditorium:**

Construction on the Joseph T. Robinson Memorial Auditorium began on December 27, 1937 and was completed in 1939; this municipal project yielded the largest auditorium in the state and the only auditorium in the south with air conditioning. The City of Little Rock financed the development of the building through an approved city bond issue and with the assistance of a \$387,000 grant from the Public Works Administration and was completed just short of two years later on December 8. Cost of the entire project totaled \$860,000. The building was named in honor of Joseph Taylor Robinson, a former United State Senator from central Arkansas.

The Little Rock Auditorium Commission then composed of influential city business leaders and politicians, hosted the pre-opening of Robinson Memorial Auditorium on Oct. 4, 1939 with a city-wide dance featuring Big Band-era musician, Jan Garber. More than 2,400 people attended the event. The official opening of the music hall on February 16, 1940, hosted a formal performance of the San Francisco Opera Ballet and presentation of the Arkansas State Symphony Orchestra.

The facility features a 2,609-seat proscenium theater with one balcony, and a 15,000 square foot exhibition hall on the lower level. In 1971, an addition was constructed on the east side of the center physically linking the facility to the adjacent Doubletree Hotel and providing improved vertical circulation with the addition of escalators and elevators.

A few notable events and performers that have taken place in Robinson Auditorium over the years have included Mickey Rooney, Bill Cosby, Liza Minnelli, Mikhail Baryshnikov, and Itzhak Perlman just to name a few. The first recorded performance of Elvis Presley's "Hound Dog" took place on May 16, 1956 on the Robinson stage, and was recorded live on KIRA radio and aired throughout central Arkansas.

The historical multi-purpose facility today plays host to an array of conventions and meetings, a number of Broadway productions, world-renowned musicians, various live entertainment as well as other arts and cultural experiences. In addition, it is also home to the Arkansas Symphony Orchestra (ASO).

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