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SPECTRA SERVES CONCESSION CHANGES AT MPEC, AUDITORIUM

Here's a goodie for foodies out there: You'll now be able to tote along sodas, Hershey bars and other concessions into the Memorial Auditorium seating area.

Previously, food and drinks weren't allowed into the auditorium. Patrons to concerts, comedy shows and the like were able to buy snacks at the concession area outside the auditorium but couldn't bring them inside the venue itself.

It is one of the changes to concessions by Spectra, the new management company for the Multi-Purpose Events Center facilities and Memorial Auditorium.

The change has been in place since October, said MPEC General Manager Brian Hoffman, but since the MPEC facilities have not hosted many concerts until recently, it hasn't been a change that has really gotten attention until now.

"We did it (allowed concessions in the venue) for Travis Tritt," said Hoffman of Tritt's concert Jan. 14 at the auditorium.

In addition, the staff has added more points of sale.

"We put a cash bar with beer inside the theater, where patrons didn't have to go outside the theater and miss the performance. Now, is that the appropriate thing to do for a symphony concert? Probably not."

Hoffman said setting up an in-theater cash bar will depend on the event. Also, the management team is mindful that some concessions can be disruptive at certain performances so likely will not offer items such as bags of popcorn at a symphony concert.

He emphasized that outside food and drinks are still not allowed in the city's public event venues, but concessions are available for purchase at the facilities' concessions stands.

Another change, Hoffman said, is the point-of-sale systems, or how patrons pay for their concessions, at Kay Yeager Coliseum, the Ray Clymer Exhibit Hall and Memorial Auditorium.

"This weekend, actually tonight (Feb. 3), for the hockey game and for any event at Kay Yeager Coliseum, we have implemented point-of-sale systems so all concessions stands will have four points of sale."

Previously, some lines at coliseum concessions stands accepted cash only, some credit cards only, and that was inefficient, Hoffman said. It also was an inconvenience to the customer.

Patrons of those facilities also will see changes soon in the types of concessions being offered at the coliseum.

“We are in the process of finalizing our designs for the renovation,” he said. “We hope to have that done in four to six weeks.”

Hoffman added that visitors will see menu changes, since the kitchen has come up with a new concessions menu. But he didn't say exactly what kinds of food and beverages will be offered in the overhaul. One idea Spectra is looking at is doing away with identical stands and giving those stands themed face lifts, so visitors may see stands dubbed the Blue Sky Cafe or Fifth St. Fryery, for example.

“We don't have it finalized. It's a work in progress. We're trying to, at the end of the day, be more user-friendly, where a hot dog isn't just offered in one area and a pizza in another.”

Spectra is analyzing pricing, so event-goers may see changes in how much they will pay for concessions. Hoffman said the prices “will be in line for a market this size.”

The MPEC also is in the midst of a Wi-Fi upgrade, which is expected to be a boon for conventions and other large-scale events.

“The Ray Clymer Exhibit Hall is in the process of expanding its Wi-Fi capabilities. The Wi-Fi in the exhibit hall will handle up to 4,000 devices,” he said.

The Wi-Fi tweak in the exhibit hall is expected to be wrapped up by the end of the month, with a similar Wi-Fi upgrade for the J.S. Bridwell Agricultural Center slated for late 2017 or early 2018.

Event-goers also will see concessions workers, bartending servers and suite attendees in new uniforms.

According to Hoffman, the changes are part of Spectra's efforts to help the city turn around the bottom line for its event and convention center facilities.

Before Spectra, the city managed Memorial Auditorium and the MPEC. For several years, funds from such sources as the hotel/motel tax pool have been used to subsidize the venues. In 2015, for example, about \$300,000 of subsidies were required to make up for the MPEC's financial losses.

Deputy City Manager Jim Dockery, in a November 2016 Times Record News article, indicated “food/beverage sales were a huge part of the business for public event venues.”

So Spectra since has hired an executive chef, Tom Agius, and the management company also is now the exclusive caterer for all the MPEC's events.

It has been a busy start to the new year.

Travis Tritt's concert is being followed by Foreigner's appearance at Memorial Auditorium on Tuesday, complete with a guest performance by members of the Wichita Falls A Cappella Choir.

Then Gabriel Iglesias will take the stage Feb. 11 at the auditorium, followed by Sesame Street Live!
March 29 at Kay Yeager Coliseum and Dwight Yoakam at the auditorium April 7.