

GCSU updating Campus Theatre marquee

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By Gil Pound



The Campus Theatre marquee has received an update in recent weeks. The neon tubing was replaced with LEDs and digital message boards were installed. The sign was scheduled to go live Friday. (Gil Pound/The Union-Recorder)

An iconic spot in downtown Milledgeville is being brought into the 21st century.

The Campus Theatre marquee at 137 W. Hancock St. is undergoing a modernization project to replace the neon tube lighting with running LEDs. Three digital message boards have also been installed, and painting is also being done.

The marquee's glowing neon once drew eyes to advertise movie showtimes until the theater's 1983 closing. Georgia College & State University, which has owned the former movie theater since 2008, has been using the sign to promote stage productions and will continue doing so. Rather than the red lettering though, that will now be done on the digital boards that have been placed to face the sidewalks and street.

In its former life with the neon tubing, the marquee would get about a half dozen work orders on it per year, according to GCSU Assistant Vice President for Facilities Management Frank Baugh.

"It's been a recurring maintenance issue," said Baugh. "It's very hard to find vendors who will even repair it, and it's very expensive. I'd say several times a year, we'd have to do something related to the neon. Over time it got harder and harder to get vendors that could respond and do the repairs."

Baugh shared that discussions regarding an update started about two years ago. The university landed on this ongoing \$200,000 project that mirrors a similar effort undertaken at Macon's Grand Opera House in 2019.

"We decided to rehab the whole marquee to try to replicate the same vintage neon look, but with more economical to maintain LED lights," Baugh said of the project to modernize the local marquee. "We're trying to maintain the same basic color scheme on it."

Work was still being done on the marquee earlier this week.

Chris Bell, who's managing the project for GCSU, said the plan was to have the sign go live Friday.

Opened in 1935, the old Campus Theatre was built and operated by the Martin movie theater chain. The upstairs portion of the building once housed professional office spaces. One of those spaces holds a place in local lore. It's where loan shark Marion Stembridge gunned down Baldwin County District Attorney Marion Ennis while Milledgeville was celebrating its 150th anniversary in 1953.

The Martin theater company later became Carmike, which opened the current six-screen theater found behind the Milledgeville Mall. That theater is now under the AMC banner.

The old Campus Theatre closed in '83 and was purchased by the Board of Regents for GCSU 25 years later. The interior of the art deco building underwent an extensive renovation in 2010 and now houses a bookstore, black box theatre, as well as classroom and office space for the GCSU Department of Theatre & Dance.