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Project of the Month: \$19.8 million renovation project of Times Union Center completed

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Photo Credit: Robert Simmons

Albany, NY Seeing is certainly believing when it comes to the \$19.8 million renovation project at the historic Times Union Center. It is a renovation project that was conceived and developed in tandem with the construction of the new Albany Capital Center; so as to better position Albany County as a national sports, entertainment, and convention destination. The Albany County-owned facility, which was once called the Pepsi Arena and the Knickerbocker Arena before that, has held a special place in the hearts of countless Albany County and New York State residents. Many will recall walking down the street with their kids to River Rats games, buying popcorn and creating memories. The history dates all the way back to January of 1990 when Frank Sinatra played the first ever show for an arena full of fans. Since then, well-over 19 million guests have entered the facility for more than 4,300 events.

Now, if you fast-forward to 2019, the Times Union Center has been completely transformed. What was once a space open to the at-times brutal elements of the Northeast that forced patrons to wait in the cold, is now an enclosed, temperature-controlled atrium. Concrete floors are now carpeted and adorned with plants and benches, and the parking garage located behind the arena is now connected, allowing patrons to move seamlessly into the event space without dealing with the elements.

“I was born and raised in the South End of Albany, just down the road from what is now the Times Union Center. I have so many cherished memories in that place and I have no doubt that countless others do too, and I wanted to invest in that nostalgia,” said county executive Daniel McCoy. “With this project, we’re improving not only the image of a facility that so many have come to know, but the image of the entire downtown area. If people see that we’re investing in our facility, others will be encouraged to follow suit. I definitely see this project as a catalyst to downtown renewal.”

A new image indeed. This project represents the first major upgrade to the long neglected Upstate sports and entertainment facility since it was originally built. The new atrium includes seating, benches, café tables and the three-story water wall—the tallest in the Northeast—providing a soothing and aesthetically pleasing element to the space. The new facility has been equipped with improved escalators and an elevator for those with disabilities to get to the upper levels. Other upgrades include new restrooms, new paint and expanded backstage facilities for musical performers.

Each floor of the center has utilized more of the open space than in its previous form. Improvements were also made to the facility itself but the classic atmosphere of a sports arena remains. Renovations were made to the concession stands, box suites and the sports bar. The upgrades were carried out with little disruptions to patrons, with annual attendance actually rising during the process. Once inside the arena itself, fans and patrons can enjoy the classics, including popcorn, pretzels and fountain drinks; along with quite a few of the local establishments serving up their own specialties, including Dinosaur Barbeque offering their southern-style cuisine.

Since the grand opening in 1990, Albany County has worked tirelessly to fill the 17,500-seat stadium with world-class acts. The Rolling Stones, Billy Joel, U2, Neil Diamond, Garth Brooks, Celine Dion, Shania Twain, The Dave Matthews Band, Phish, Dixie Chicks, Tina Turner, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Eric Clapton, Bruce Springsteen and the Grateful Dead have all walked the stage and sold out shows at the Times Union Center.

NCAA Women’s Basketball Regional Tournament, 2019. Photo Credit: Robert Simmons

The Times Union Center is a regular host of countless NCAA events and is the home court of the Siena Saints Men’s Basketball team of nearby Siena College in Loudonville. In 1995, the arena hosted the NCAA Men’s Basketball Championship First and Second Rounds, the first host site in the country to sell out. The arena hosted the NCAA Hockey National Championships in 1992 and the NCAA Hockey East Regional in 1994, 1996 and 1998, and Frozen Four in 2001.

The college sports fan base is as enthusiastic as any other, if not more than most, with massive crowds for game time. The Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference (MAAC) Tournament just finished its fifth year in a row in downtown Albany and its 20th since 1990, the most of any other venue involved in the series. While the tournament has been relocated over the years, no other venue has been

able to match the attendance regularly seen at the center. There were nearly 32,000 fans attending in 2017 showing their team spirit and a record high of 53,569 in 2010.

NYSPHSAA Wrestling Championships held at the Times Union Center, February 2019

Aside from the MAAC tournament, the Times Union Center has also made a name for itself showcasing women in sports. It hosted the NCAA Women's Basketball Regional East three of the last five years, and will welcome back the NCAA Division I Women's Basketball Regional in 2021. Other host cities selected for the regionals that year include Austin, Texas and Cincinnati, Ohio.

Looking forward, Albany County and the Times Union Center will play host to the inaugural Aurora Games coming up in August, an all-female sports and entertainment festival that will feature some of the top talent in sports. Each of the six days will be devoted to a specific sport, from tennis to gymnastics to basketball. The two opposing sides are Team Americas, represented by athletes from counties like the United States and Canada, and Team World, with counties that include Germany, Finland and Japan.

Legendary Olympians Jackie Joyner-Kersey and Nadia Comaneci will serve as honorary team captains, who together have a combined eight gold medals. Already confirmed to be involved in the competition include Lindsay Whalen, Sarah Pavan, Melissa Humana-Paredes, Michele Timms, Garbine Muguruza and Ashley Wagner. Tourism for the international event will likely be a boon for tourism and local businesses. The Aurora Games and an Upstate New York favorite, Stewart's Shops, have already partnered to help local customers pay for their tickets by offering special discounts. A local hotel is offering special rates on a block of rooms and similar partnerships could very well be on the way.

"One hundred years ago Albany County and the Capital Region played a critical role in the emergence of the suffragette movement so it is only fitting that the Aurora Games comes to our area to celebrate women in sports," said McCoy. "In our discussions with the organizers, we saw an opportunity to create a women's sports facility that can become the leading destination for training, advancement, rehab and competition for women's sports. The county is excited about the potential for becoming the permanent home of this event."

Mumford & Sons concert at Times Union Center, March 2019

Photo Credit: Robert Simmons

Part of the renovations included a brand new media workroom that can hold up to 250 people and additional back office space, making the arena better equipped to host large, well-attended sports

events like these. This addition was actually critical to bringing the first and second rounds of the men's NCAA basketball tournament back to Albany in March of 2020, the first time since 2003 that NCAA Men's Basketball made its way to town when the facility still held the Pepsi Arena moniker. The last year the arena held the first and second rounds of the tournament was 1995.

And the facility isn't just for music and sports fans, there are plenty of chances for parents to bring the kids to family-friendly events. The Times Union Center has hosted Disney on Ice, the Harlem Globetrotters, Sesame Street Live, Barney's Big Surprise, Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus and Nickelodeon's Live Tour and plenty of others, with PAW Patrol Live and Jurassic World Live Tour coming up this year.

While the Times Union Center is owned by Albany County, it is operated on a day-to-day basis by SMG, one of the world's largest private management firms. The company recently announced its plan to merge with AEG Facilities and the new conglomerate will be able to draw on even greater resources that will translate into even more acts at the Times Union Center.

Photo Credit: Robert Simmons

For three decades now, the Times Union Center has brought the county a profit and the renovations have certainly helped. In 2016, before the renovations were complete, the stadium had a net operating income of over \$915,000. Compare that to 2018, which saw a nearly \$1.6 million profit—a 58% growth, the highest profit since 2007.

Annual attendance has also steadily grown over the years, from 438,744 in 2015, to 511,438 in 2018. Attendance rose as the number of events actually declined after the Albany Devils departed the Capital City. Albany County, the Times Union Center and SMG have responded by ushering in arena football, welcoming the Albany Empire to the indoor field last year that already has a solid fan base from the surrounding area. Also, numerous sold out concerts have filled weekend dates previously used for hockey games.

The nearly \$20 million project also means that the Times Union Center will be able to host even more events than ever before.

“When booking agencies hear that you put \$20 million to \$30 million into a building, now they want to play it,” said Bob Belber, SMG general manager of Times Union Center. “In the last six months, we've had some of the biggest names in music play to sold out crowds. Metallica, Justin Timberlake, Elton John and Fleetwood Mac are just a sample of those names. We are already looking forward to John Mayer, Thomas Rhett and Celine Dion in 2019. Thanks to the renovations, I expect this trend to continue.”

And if the first quarter is any indicator, 2019 could be one of the best years yet for the Times Union Center. After sold out concerts that featured Panic! At The Disco, Elton John, Mumford and Sons,

Ariana Grande, Blake Shelton and Fleetwood Mac – among other events and shows – the arena has already brought in over \$9.7 million in gross ticket sales over the three-month period. That translates into 250,000 fans making their way into Downtown Albany, enjoying the local food, drink and shopping scene.

In order to accommodate the diverse acts at the arena, staff are required to work at a brisk pace, constantly morphing the layout of stages and floors to ensure its ready for the next arrival. From January through March of 2019, staff logged 74,000 hours, 34,500 in March alone, and changed over the arena an astounding 30 times and set 9,000 chairs.

Throughout the year, the Times Union Center employs 32 full-time employees along with 660 part-time workers who, together, ensure the facility is running smoothly on behalf of fans and patrons.

This renovation project alone required 102,741 hours of labor carried out by more than 200 workers who were employed during the process. Those include members of Gilbane Construction and Murnane Building Contractors who led the enormous construction venture, along with architects at Synthesis Architects, carpenters, electricians, painters and so many others in the union trades. Beyond the jobs that were directly created over the 14 months that renovations were ongoing, there have been countless other jobs created indirectly at local businesses in the area.

“Creating well-paying jobs should always be a top priority of elected officials, it’s what makes the economy tick and it can be the deciding factor before someone slips into poverty. The wages from the jobs we created through this project and those at the Times Union Center are invested right back into the downtown area, Albany County and the Capital Region,” said McCoy. “Beyond that, it always amazes me to see how Downtown Albany comes alive on the night of a show or a game. Each of those patrons may have dinner at a local restaurant beforehand, or a drink at the nearby bar, or book a room at one of our hotels. This is the true economic impact of this renovation project.”

At the end of the day, the Times Union Center is a government facility and profitability translates into services for taxpayers and all those who call Albany County home. In 2018, the profits from the center meant \$1.12 million for the County’s general fund.

“For six years now, Albany County has remained under the state property tax cap, and this year we were even able to provide local businesses and property owners with a tax cut, making Albany County a more affordable place to live, work, raise a family, and of course, enjoy the nightlife,” said McCoy. “It is through smart investments, like the one we made in the Times Union Center, that allow us to do that and pay for nationally recognized services and programs that address some of the most pressing issues our people face. Whether it’s our children, seniors, veterans...the Times Union Center is helping.”

Aside from major events in the arena, the Times Union Center Atrium serves as a space for events in its own right. In just the past year, county executive McCoy has honored his Citizen of the Month in front of the massive Christmas tree in the atrium, hosted panel discussions and showcased a

restored 1991 Humvee that would be auctioned with proceeds going to the Feed Our Vets charity. Part of the renovations were additional rooms that can be rented out to businesses and organizations for their own events, helping to generate even more revenue.

Additionally, the atrium has a great supplemental value to any street festival or farmers market hosted right on South Pearl St. Residents can spend some time inside while the road is shut down during Fan Fests before Albany Empire arena football games, farmers markets or free live music.

This project has also allowed Albany County to give back to the community in some creative ways. While the two, massive 20-foot LED screens on the front of the building serve to advertise upcoming events and communicate with the public about important updates, they have also been used to offer free movies to the public. Similar to the drive-in movie theaters that once covered upstate New York, local families were invited to bring lawn chairs to South Pearl Street for Bites, Camera, Action! that featured a different popular showing each Monday throughout the summer.

The Times Union Center renovation project came in on-time and at budget. This prime Albany facility is being noticed by leading organizations. Since the renovations were complete, the Times Union Center has earned, among others, the “Prime Site” Award from Facilities Management twice and the “Comeback Building of the Year” Award from the Building Owners and Managers Association.

“The author Ellen Kent once wrote, ‘Buildings are monuments within our environment, testimonies to our sense of place. A memorable building one that is responsive to the needs for which it was built, helps shape a community and its people.’ This quote stuck with me, and I wanted to make this building far more than just a concert venue. I think we accomplished that with this project,” said McCoy.

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