

By Richard Burgess

Advocate Acadiana Bureau

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LAFAYETTE - A major expansion of the Acadiana Center for the Arts downtown is on track to open by fall 2010, and crews have been meticulously working to make the center's new theater one of the best sounding rooms in the state.

With the project at a midpoint, Acadiana Center for the Arts Executive Director Gerd Wuestemann offered a tour on Thursday to show off progress and offer insight on the amount of time, money and labor spent to ensure premium sound in the theater.

"This is near studio silent," he said. "This is definitely the quietest theater in Louisiana."

The 300-seat theater is a self-contained structure within the larger building, a design that reduces the effect of external vibrations.

The walls of the theater are made of 10-inch thick concrete panels with 3 inches of embedded insulation.

To cut down on vibrations from the air conditioning system, the main chilling units on the roof sit suspended on a bed of springs, and the ducts are hung with spring suspension.

The air conditioning ducts are massive, allowing for a silent system that depends on a high volume of air moving at low speeds, so as not to disturb a performance with the sound of air rushing through a vent or return unit.

"You are quietly tumbling air from the top of the ceiling," Wuestemann said.

The theater is designed to accommodate everything from a solo classical performance or a dance troupe to a rock band, theatrical performance, movie screening or jazz trio.

Wuestemann said the space could be arranged with the stage at one end or in the middle, or all the seats could be taken out to open up 6,000 square feet of floor space.

"There are basically endless ways to reconfigure this room," he said.

One side of the theater will be a wall of two sheets of acoustical glass with a shutter in between that could be raised to open up a view from Vermilion Street.

"We could allow people as they are passing by to see what's going on,"

Wuestemann said.

The expansion under way also includes space for a new coffee shop, a much larger entrance and expanded public areas.

The project, operating with a budget of about \$15 million from state government, began in February.

Most of the work is on track to be completed by the summer, and the expansion is expected to open to the public by October, Wuestemann said.

The Center for the Arts was completed in 2004 and includes offices, galleries and teaching space.

The expansion was initially envisioned as a second phase of the arts center to begin a few months after the completion of the first, but the work been delayed for several years because of a lack of funding.

The contractor for the project is Lemoine Co. of Lafayette.

Architects Southwest, is serving as executive architect, and the design architect is Eskew+Dumez+Ripple, of New Orleans.

Akustics and Theatre Projects Consultants are serving as consultants for the acoustics and design of the theater.