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CONVENTION & ENTERTAINMENT CENTER

LONG BEACH ADDS OPTIONS

Creating a transformational ballroom space within the arena attracts new customers

by JESSICA BOUDEVIN

The gem of the \$40-million renovation and repositioning of Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center is the 45,000-sq.-ft. Pacific Ballroom at Long Beach Arena. The space, created by a curtaining system and the largest moveable tension grid system in the world, will provide extra ballroom space for the facility to host larger conferences and can be used individually for events.



This rendering of Pacific Ballroom at Long Beach Arena shows the curtain and tension grid system creating a banquet setup. (Photo by Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center)

The renovations are funded by the city through its Tidelands Operating Fund, which is mostly profit from Long Beach's oil properties. The transformation of the arena space into truly flexible event space while still available in traditional set ups, will be celebrated at a "Transformation Unveiled" party Nov. 20.

The entire Pacific Ballroom space cost around \$8-\$9 million, with \$1.6 million going toward a state-of-the-art lighting, sound and video system. The 125,000-pound tension grid system from J.R. Clancy can be raised up to ballroom level (30 feet) in 10 minutes and to 'storage' of 70 feet in less than 25 minutes. A curtaining system raises and lowers independently of the tension grid and can hide arena seats from view for ballroom events.

WORKING INSIDE THE ENVELOPE

"We came up with the idea for this concept because the criteria for this venue was to make it as flexible as possible," said Jerry Sherman,

associate architect on the project.

Architect of record for the project, John Fisher of JFSA, said that they have drawn up plans for at least 10 different event arrangements for concerts, boxing and banquets, but that he's sure it will end up being used in ways that the architects never anticipated.

"Things like this only happen because of the needs and wishes of the clients," said Fisher. "You don't have innovation without innovative clients who want the flexibility."

SMG's GM for the facility Charlie Beirne said the venue is willing to work with its clients on just about anything.

"When people ask us if we can do something, 99.9 percent of the time our answer is yes, we'll work something out to make the event the best it can be," said Beirne.

The tension grid can be raised to storage space or lowered to the floor at the touch of a button, and is removable should a large production need to hang equipment from the ceiling.

"Essentially this is us working inside the envelope of the arena itself," said Michael Ferguson, director of the Los Angeles office of Theatre Projects Consultants, who served as theater design consultant.

The tension grid is comprised of 45 grid frame subassemblies made from steel tubing, channels and cables with aluminum railings.

J.R. Clancy, which has been around since 1885, took on the challenge of creating the first tension grid that raises and lowers. The company's Bridget Cox said that the challenges for this project were compounded by the size of the structure and the limited amount of time.

"It's only a little over a year that we've been involved, and really just since January that the design was clarified enough that we could engineer the drawings for the grid," said Cox. The arena didn't shut down completely during installation, which started in June. Workers had four days in the venue before moving out for the weekend, then coming back to set up on Mondays.

"We really could not lose a day — there was no contingency there," she added. For a similar size project, Cox said J.R. Clancy is usually involved for 2-3 years.

ONE STOP SHOP

The tension grid is raised and lowered with a wireless controller.

Not only does the tension grid create a technical ceiling and the curtains create a room, a new sound and lighting system also creates a high-end feel and serves as a value-add for the consumer.

Tom Ruzika designed the Pacific Ballroom lighting in order to "transform the room from a fairly utilitarian old arena to something that had a dynamic quality of light and would be able to change moods and atmosphere depending on the event.

There are 400 total lights with 180 pin-point lights that can be focused on spaces like banquet tables.

"There's a large group of lights meant to light the tables and make it a more intimate experience," said Ruzika. "On top of that there are layers of light to change the color of the room, layers of lights on the curtains, and another layer for texture or pattern effects."

The LED lights change color digitally through a computer system.

"As a special event designer you spend a lot of money to do some very basic things, so to have the ability to walk into a room and to know that the walls, floors or tables can all be instantly changed in color and are focused and ready to go saves time and money," said Ferguson. "That's literally tens of thousands of dollars worth of value."

A high-tech sound system ensures the quality of sound is maintained in the Pacific Ballroom even though it's within a large arena space. Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center used steerable sound technology from Renkus-Heinz. The Pacific Ballroom is outfitted with 20 IC² loudspeakers, each of which can deliver as many as four controllable beams of sound.

"With a traditional loudspeaker the sound will be fairly omnidirectional and reflect off of surfaces causing echoes, and the arena is a very reverberant space," said Renkus-Heinz's VP of Sales and Marketing Rik Kirby. Each component within the IC² loudspeakers has its own amplifier and DSP (digital signal processor), which allows the speaker to create beams of

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sound as tight as five degrees.

"Everybody gets direct sound and it sounds very close and immediate to the audience member and doesn't cause echoes," said Kirby. "It's not just the highest quality of sound from the loudspeaker, but about controlling how it's delivered to the audience."

The Pacific Ballroom at Long Beach Arena will also have 16 18-inch subwoofers. All of the components are hung on the tension grid and controlled through a computer, which shows a graphical prediction of where the sound will hit.

Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center is using Renkus-Heinz's Varia modular point source line array speakers in the atrium, which are moveable and can be used in other parts of the convention center. Kirby said the sound equipment alone is in the range of a couple hundred thousand dollars.

BRINGING IN BUSINESS

The Pacific Ballroom at Long Beach Arena will provide the space to attract larger events and continue hosting conferences.

"The opportunities that will now exist for special events, general sessions and corporate events will be eye-opening for meeting plan-

ners," said Gregg Caren, SMG's Exec. VP convention centers & business development. "This creative adaptive reuse of an entertainment venue is really the critical crossover that will help sell it to bring in larger convention events."

The city is actively selling the results of the renovation. Already there are eight groups booked that will bring nearly \$30 million in economic impact. "There are 11 groups right now that are tentative, representing another \$25 million for the city," said Allison Lesser, VP of Sales for Long Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau. "These are groups that will use the arena ballroom space for a reception or marquee session or would not have fit at the venue without the extra space."

LBCVB President & CEO Steve Goodling said the new ballroom, lights and sound technology could save event organizers anywhere from \$250,000-\$350,000. He calls the Pacific Ballroom space 'additional purposing.'

"We can still do all of the things we used to do in the arena, but now we can shrink it down and make it accessible for smaller groups, too," said Goodling.

There were several improvements to the space in addition to the repositioning of the Pacific Ballroom. New chandeliers, custom seating pods and LED stage lighting were

added in the arena lobby, as well as free WiFi in all public areas from Smart City. relandscaping at Terrace Theatre Plaza added a palm tree tropical garden and all 3,000 seats were replaced in the Terrace Theatre. Also, green rooms and VIP rooms were upgraded with new carpet, lighting and marble counters.

"In the convention center side of the building we brought in furniture and created a plethora of seating areas so that when people come out of a session they can actually sit and talk with someone they just met or an old friend, or just sit and fire up their device," said Goodling, who said hosting the TED conference inspired the addition of new conversation spaces.

"We wanted to create a venue that permitted you to instantly make that contact, connect and collaborate," he added. "Every organization wants their attendees to be fired up about the information that was shared because it creates a sense of community."

The value-adds at Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center will save organizers time and money.

"Having things like seating pods, different options with the lighting and sound, and the arena project itself means we're bringing inventory that business entities are looking for," said the facility's Asst. GM Dan Lee. "Instead of them shopping for it, we already have it. As a result their budget isn't impacted as much."

Renovating as opposed to building a new space for the Pacific Ballroom provides a high value for the city, with Ferguson estimating the total cost as just 20-to-30 percent of the cost of new construction. The ballroom space is important for attracting new events, but it's really about how the whole facility works in unison, as well as how it benefits and works with other city improvements including more than \$50 million invested in convention center-adjacent hotels and a \$140-million modernization of Long Beach Airport.

"This is about contributing to the city of Long Beach and their facilities to not just make them a viable choice for conventions, but a first choice," said Ferguson. "That equals more money for the economy, for local businesses and for the city."

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From all of us at Smart City to the city of Long Beach and the Long Beach CVB, congratulations on the grand opening of the Pacific Ballroom!

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