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Fargo movie theaters offer features for hard-of-hearing, visually impaired

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West Acres Cinema Assistant Manager Tristan Ross sits next to one of the closed-captioning devices for hard-of-hearing moviegoers. The portable devices fit into the cupholders on the chairs. Dave Wallis / The Forum

FARGO – John Neiss used to go to the movies even when he couldn't tell what was going on in them.

The Fargo man, who is deaf, was used to seeing movies with closed captioning in Rochester, N.Y., where he attended the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in the mid-2000s.

But when Neiss moved back to Fargo in 2009, local movie theaters didn't have such options. Closed captioning wasn't available.

Regardless, because he still wanted the movie theater experience and didn't want to wait for movies to come out on DVD, Neiss went anyway.

Not surprisingly, he was often frustrated and confused by not knowing what was going on.

"I was only able to decrypt actions and body languages without understanding the real plot behind it," he said last week through an interpreter, adding that it could be a "nightmare" to try and figure out what was going on.

That all changed in the fall of 2011, when Marcus Theatres – which owns the West Acres Cinema and Century 10 Cinema in Fargo – transitioned to digital cinema technology.

Included in that transition were two features designed to offer a more accessible movie-going experience:

CaptiView closed captioning for the hard-of-hearing, and Fidelio descriptive narration for the visually impaired.

For Neiss and many others in the Fargo-Moorhead area who previously weren't able to attend movies, the experience suddenly became much more convenient.

Small devices, big impact

Both the closed captioning and descriptive narration technologies are transmitted by small, wireless devices available at the movie theaters' box office for no charge.

The closed captioning is meant to be placed in the moviegoer's cupholder, and has a small, bendable arm that connects the transmitting device to an easy-to-read screen.

The screen, which has a protective shield so as not to disturb other moviegoers, displays a film's closed-captioning track in LED text.

The descriptive narration, meanwhile, is a similar device connected to a pair of headphones, which moviegoers wear during the movie.

An audio track of what's happening in the film is transmitted through the headphones, explains Carlo Petrick, communications manager for Marcus Theatres.

"The movie is described to the viewer as they are watching it," Petrick says. "They're hearing a description of what's going on on the screen, rather than seeing it."

The descriptive narration track is produced by the studio that releases the film, Petrick says, so whether a person attends a movie at Marcus Theatres or another chain, they'd hear the same audio description.

Petrick describes both technologies as an ongoing effort by Marcus Theatres to make the movie-going experience more accessible for everyone.

"Marcus has been one of the leaders in the exhibition industry in putting in this kind of technology and making movies more accessible for people who are deaf and hard-of-hearing and also visually impaired," Petrick says.

At West Acres Cinema, General Manager Rick Solarski says most, but not quite all, movies have the closed-captioning or descriptive-narration available. Even though the features have been available for a while now, theater staff has needed the time to make sure everything works smoothly.

3-D movies, for example, occasionally create problems for the closed captioning, Solarski says.

"We're working on trying to get the bugs out," he says.

Information about whether a specific movie has closed captioning or descriptive narration can be found on the Century 10 or West Acres cinemas' websites.

The Fargo Theatre downtown, meanwhile, doesn't offer such features, but is in the middle of a capital campaign to raise funds to convert to digital cinema.

The campaign currently sits at nearly \$180,000, with a goal of \$200,000, according to Emily Beck, the theater's

executive director.

When the theater makes the switch to digital, it will also be able to offer closed captioning and descriptive narration, Beck says.

“I think our audiences will be glad when we’re able to offer those things,” she adds.

Enhanced quality of life

Neiss, who was the first person to use the closed captioning technology at West Acres Cinema, says the technology has made a huge difference for him.

“Wow, I was impressed,” he says. “With that technology, it helps me to enjoy the movie more.”

Since the introduction of the closed captioning, Neiss has started going to movies more often.

“It helps me to understand everything that’s happening in the movie, and to finally enjoy the ending without questions,” he says.

Because of that accessibility and convenience, Solarski says an increased effort is being made to let people in the community know about the availability of the closed captioning and descriptive narration.

“We’ve made some announcements to some of the support groups in the area that have previously expressed interest, and gotten the word out that way,” he says.

Mark Kueffler, president of the North Dakota Association of the Blind, says he and others in the local blind community hadn’t heard of the descriptive narration until just recently.

Kueffler, of West Fargo, says that he’s emailed other visually-impaired people in the area to let them know about it.

“I’m glad that (Marcus Theatres), locally, have foreseen that there was a need there, and followed through with it,” Kueffler says.

When asked whether he thought the local blind and visually-impaired community would take advantage of the descriptive narration and go see movies now, Kueffler answered, “For those that enjoy movies, why wouldn’t they?”

Neiss also applauds Marcus Theatres for making the features available in Fargo.

“The technology enhances the quality of my life as a deaf person,” he says. “It’s improved my life. It’s made it better. And it really means a lot to me.”

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