Union Projects Will Make Ballroom More Inclusive, Turn U-Mart Into Market

Projects underway at the Student Union Memorial Center will make the ballroom more inclusive and turn a long-standing convenience store into a market.

The first project, a renovation of the Grand Ballroom’s stage to provide more inclusive access, particularly for wheelchair users and others with physical challenges, will replace the stairs on both sides of the stage with ramps. That work began late last month. The second project, which began in early July, will revamp the U-Mart, giving it a new name and new offerings.

Ballroom stage upgrades

As originally designed, the union's Grand Ballroom had sets of stairs on each side of the stage. Wheelchair users had to use a ramp that ran along the back of the stage, behind a projector screen.

"It functions, but it’s not a very good community experience," said Todd Millay, senior director of the Arizona Student Unions. "Universal design just makes a lot of sense, which means the stage is just designed for everybody."

Renovations began June 29 to replace the stairs with ramps, making the venue more inclusive for everyone who uses it, Millay said.

The renovations were suggested about a year and a half ago by experts in the Disability Resource Center. Due to the stage’s current design, events that used the stage, such as convocations and awards ceremonies, required disabled people and those with mobility impairments to access the stage differently, said Amanda Kraus, assistant vice president for campus life, executive director of disability resources and executive director of housing and residential life.

The new design will replace the steps with ramps on both sides of the stage.

"Not only will this provide equitable access for all participants, it models an effective way to design a stage that promotes our values of equity and inclusion," Kraus said.

The new design will make the ballroom the largest venue in Tucson with inclusive access to a stage, said Sherry Santee, senior access consultant at the DRC. The ballroom has a maximum capacity of 1,900.

The design also received input from Eric Bell, physical access coordinator at the DRC.

Because the stage hides much of the electrical components and wiring used during events,
redesigning it involves more than just replacing a wooden platform, Millay said. The planning took place over about a year. It was scheduled to be done in July, when use of the space is lowest.

The new stage is expected to be done by early August.

**U-Mart to become Arizona Market**

Another change that frequent union patrons will notice is a complete renovation of the U-Mart, the convenience store directly across from the UA BookStore.

When completed, the store will feature much of the same convenience-store offerings? including U-Mart favorites such as Eegee's frozen drinks, candy and other snacks. But new hot and cold food bars will provide healthier options, such as yogurt, fruit, vegetables, cage-free eggs, hot sandwiches with whole-grain bread and salads.

A new farmer's market section will offer fresh fruits and vegetables, including some that are locally sourced.

Christine Carlson, associate director for retail dining and nutrition at Arizona Student Unions, is leading the renovation of the store.

"Healthier options in a grab-and-go store are important to meet the busy schedules of the campus community," she said. "We want to ensure everyone can have healthier options regardless of the time they have available."

The menu is still in development, but customers can expect the new store to resemble the dining areas seen in many Whole Foods stores, combined with a market similar to Sprouts.

The changes come in response to declining revenue at U-Mart in recent years, Millay said, along with survey feedback indicating that students wanted more healthy and affordable options.

Providing those has been a challenge, he added.

"To get healthy and affordable is like finding a unicorn," Millay said, explaining that organic and raw goods are more expensive.

But union leadership worked to "make affordable happen," Millay added, pointing to restaurants such as Nrich Urban Market, which serves fresh-pressed juices, seasonal produce and other healthy options. The union undercharges for those options to make them affordable, and revenue from other union restaurants helps make up the difference, Millay said.

The seating and dining area outside the store will be expanded and redesigned to match the changes inside.

The work is expected to be completed the first week in August.

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