

Boedecker strives to improve film experience for hearing impaired

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Film fans likely will have a more enjoyable time at the Boedecker Theater thanks to a newly installed hearing loop system.

(Cliff Grassmick / Staff Photographer)

You can't see it. But you can hear it — if you're wearing the right hearing aid.

Last week, the Boedecker Theater in Boulder unveiled a new-old system that makes movie-watching more accessible and comfortable for people with hearing impairments.

The technology, called a hearing loop, is far from high-tech or new. But it is new to the theater and a growing number of gathering spaces and entertainment venues throughout Boulder County.

The premise is simple, says Laura Hansen, with Denver-based Assist 2 Hear, which installed the loop in the Boe.

A hearing loop, or inductive loop system, is an array of wires typically laid in the floor that creates a magnetic field that is connected to a PA system. This transmits the sound directly to hearing aids that have telecoils, which most modern hearing aids have, Hansen says.

"You just walk in, switch it to the T-coil program and you can enjoy," she says.

Hearing loops are growing in popularity, led by the demand of aging Baby Boomers who "are not afraid to complain," says Hansen, with a laugh.

"We want to hear. We're not just going to accept our hearing loss."

Hearing loss is the most common disability in the nation, according to the Hearing Loss Association of America. By age 65, one in three people has hearing loss, the association says.

Assist 2 Hear has installed hearing loops in a handful of other large spaces throughout Boulder County.

The Chautauqua Park Community House and Boulder Dinner Theater have loops.

You also can find them at Balfour Senior Living, the Boulder County Commissioners hearing room, Boulder County Land Use Office, Boulder County Jail front desk window, Boulder County Training Room and Frasier Meadows Retirement Community.

Several churches (the Community United Church of Christ, Nelson Road Baptist Church, St. Johns Episcopal Church and First Congregational Church) have loops, and increasingly more large classrooms at the University of Colorado-Boulder do, too. More are scheduled for installation on campus next month.



Inductive loop systems are installed in the walls and floors of the venues that use them.

(Courtesy photo)

Hansen says hearing loops go beyond basic ADA-compliance standards that you find in most venues and community meeting rooms.

In many other movie theaters, people with hearing impairments can check out a special headset or neck loop and belt pack that transmits and amplifies the audio via radio waves.

"They meet ADA standards, but they typically gather dust," Hansen says. "People don't use them."

Century Boulder also offers a hand-held closed-caption device, as well as special audio headsets describing the action for people who are vision-impaired.

However, Hansen says some people don't want to wear audio-enhancing headphones because they are uncomfortable and don't always work that well.

Some are ear buds, which don't fit in the ear along with hearing aids, or the external headphones push against the hearing aid.

Plus, at venues such as the Boedecker, the headphones help with hearing the films but not the audience discussions that are common after a show, says Glenn Webb, cinema manager.

That's why the theater installed the new system, which he says cost less than \$10,000. Assist 2 Hear says cost depends on the size of the space and can reach \$50,000. The Boedecker seats 60.

Its new system has a microphone for the film and in the audience, with a mixer that can switch between the two as needed.

"I hope they feel much more included and that they participate more, especially in the discussion," Webb says. "If they feel like there's no barrier to their complete participation in the community, that's what we're about here: creating a community around a common experience."

In addition, serving an underserved population makes good business sense, he says.

Hansen says more smaller venues and home entertainment systems are using bluetooth transmitters, but they don't work in large spaces.

"The hearing loop is old technology," she says, "but I say so is the wheel. It still works, and it's simple."

To learn more about T-coils and how to activate it on your hearing aid, she recommends contacting an audiologist.

The Boedecker still offers headsets that transmit audio via radio, for people whose hearing aids don't have T-coils.

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