by Darby Baham, d. Report: April 2012 – Cover Story

Thirty-two years after shutting its doors, the Howard Theatre re-opened to the public on a night filled with dancing, celebrities, and memories of the place that once launched the careers of people like Marvin Gaye and Ella Fitzgerald. Hosted by Bill Cosby, Wanda Sykes, and Dick Gregory, the gala offered the chance for many to see the culmination of the hard work that had gone into completing a six-year, $29-million undertaking.

Yet, for many DDOT employees, the re-opening of the theatre also marked the culmination of planning and the two months it took to execute the near-completion of the Howard Theatre Area Revitalization Project—a DDOT-wide effort that  coincided with the construction of the Howard Theatre.

This effort was coordinated between three DDOT administrations (IPMA, TOA, and PPSA) and at least six departments within the agency. While a large part of the revitalization project focused on improving the streetscape of the area, DDOT also worked to ensure the safety of those traveling to and from the location, and worked to protect residential parking in the neighborhood.

“Given the time and schedule for the project, I was extremely impressed with the coordination of the construction team and the progress made to meet the needs of the city,” said Wendy Peckham, Team 1 Program Manager in IPMA.

DDOT’s handprints can be seen throughout the revitalized area. The agency fabricated and installed more than 250 new signs, installed a new traffic signal at 7th and T Street NW, layed brick and concrete pavers, and utilized more than 100 signs to designate additional blocks in the surrounding neighborhood under the Residential Parking Permit (RPP) program.

Aside from installing these visible infrastructure improvements, DDOT employees contributed in other ways to the effort to restore this District landmark. For instance, traffic control officers (TCOs) helped direct traffic during several events that were held to commemorate the opening of the theatre, such as community day, industry day and a gala.

Also, employees from PPSA supported the design review of the streetscape project, primarily to ensure the safety of bicyclists and pedestrians who frequent the surrounding area.

It was this coordinated and centralized effort that would help IPMA’s Team 1 complete 85 percent of the $2.5 million project before the theatre opened and complete 100 percent of the reconstruction directly around the theatre. This work also included upgrading the surrounding streetscape, landscape, and other infrastructure surrounding the Howard Theatre. What began as improvements to coincide with the restoration of a DC historical landmark turned into a shining example of DDOT’s commitment to excellence.

The Howard Theatre is located on T Street NW between 7th Street and Florida Avenue NW. It originally opened in 1910, predating the famed Apollo Theatre in New York City. At the time, the theatre was one of the only locations Black artists could perform in the District, and it would go on to host acts such as Duke Ellington, Aretha Franklin, Redd Foxx, and the Supremes. It first closed in 1970, but reopened in 1975 after gaining a National Register nomination the year before. Unfortunately, the theatre would close again in 1980 and would remain closed until its grand reopening this year.