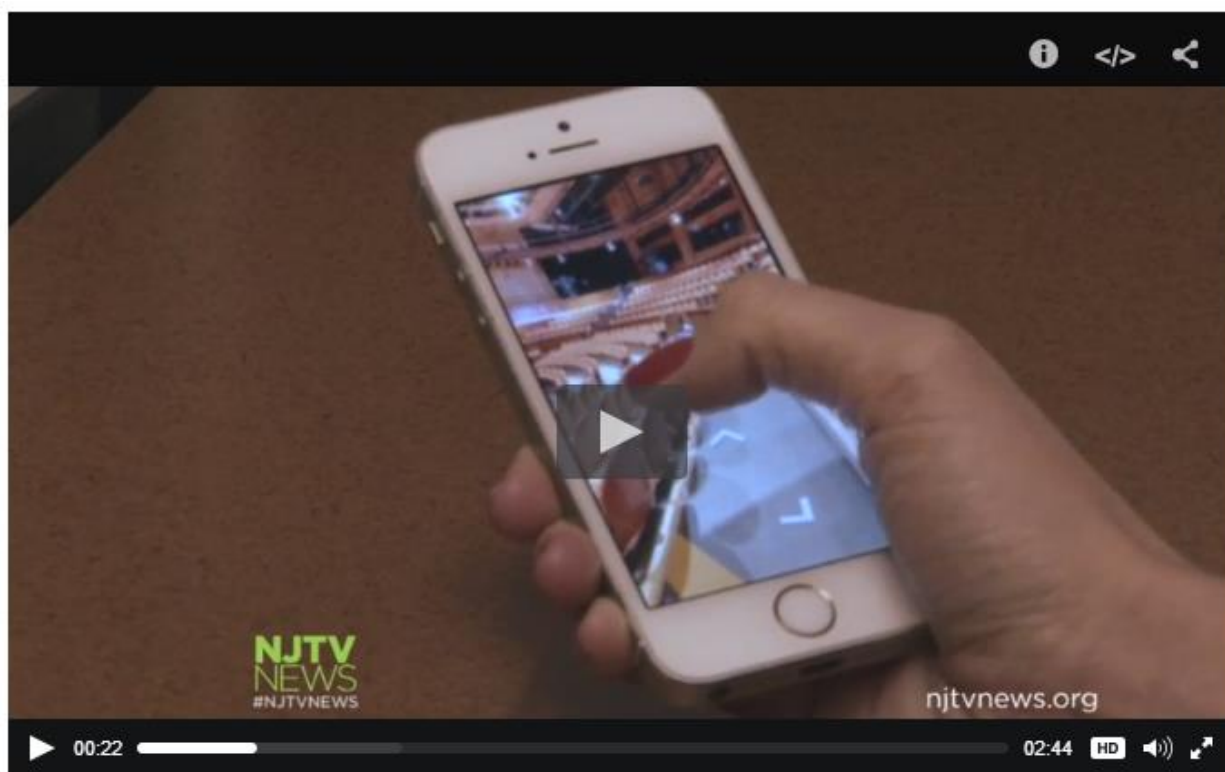




## Google Virtual Tours Enhance Theater Accessibility



By Maddie Orton  
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Charles Newman is director of Union County's Office for the Disabled. When he goes to a play, he needs to take certain logistics into account. Now the New Jersey Theatre Alliance and several of its member theaters are using Google technology to make information about accessibility easily accessible through virtual tours.

"There's so much detail in the 360-degree virtual tour that you can actually see what the surface is going to look like — if there're any bumps or thresholds...where the elevator might

be, where the ramp might be,” explains Newman. “And it makes it a lot easier to plan ahead of time.”

Patrons can visit the Google Maps website, find a theater and click “See Inside.” From there, they can move through the space and view it from floor to ceiling.

Google contractor Jim Hilker creates these virtual tours. He says it’s likely the first of its kind.

“This is the first project that I’ve heard of or I’m aware of, as well as my coordinators at Google that I work with — the first time a project of this nature, with this intent, has been done in the United States,” Hilker, president and CEO of PlacesMobile Inc., says.

This adaptation of the Google service was the brainchild of Two River Theater Company’s Alycia Yerves and New Jersey Theatre Alliance’s Robert Carr.

“To be honest, when we first were considering the idea, we hadn’t thought of that aspect initially,” Yerves says. “It wasn’t until Robert Carr reached out to me and mentioned that.”

“It was ‘Eureka!’” says Carr. “I mean, it was like this was what we needed to do.”

The Alliance had been searching for a way to showcase theater interiors for years, and Hilker jumped at the chance to take on the project.

“Normally we would focus on just the main entrance,” Hilker explains. “But this one we had to specifically think about, ‘OK, if we were in a wheelchair, or if we couldn’t walk well...what would we need to do? Which path would we need to take when we do the virtual tour?’”

Making arts accessible is the ongoing mission of the Theatre Alliance’s Cultural Access Network Project. This year Carr received the Kennedy Center’s inaugural Community Asset Award for his work. “As organizations in the audience business, to not address these audiences, makes little sense,” he says.

Hilker says he hopes other businesses that use the virtual tour tool follow suit. “I have brought it up to a few others just by chance because I think it’s so cool, and they were like,

'Oh yeah! I think it's a great idea.' And you can see they start thinking a little differently, too," Hilker says.

Soon, two more theaters are scheduled to join the ranks and open their doors for virtual tours.