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Construction continues at the Prairie Capital Convention Center as the new ticket counter begins to take shape with a new curved design to allow for less congestion as patrons line up for tickets. - Justin L. Fowler/The State Journal-Register

Prairie Capital Convention Center update moves toward completion

By Bernard Schoenburg

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Not only will it have more space designed to improve service to visitors, but it's going to look better, too. That's how Brian Oaks, general manager of the Prairie Capital Convention Center, sees the \$15.8 million renovation that's scheduled to be done by the end of the year.

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"There's no question that part of the goal when we went into the renovation, with modernizing the facility, was also trying to break down that 30-year-old image of the convention center as just this square, blond-brick building," Oaks said this week as he showed off several areas still under construction.

Oaks noted that when comedian Bob Hope was the first major act to appear at the convention center when it opened in 1979, he didn't exactly praise the style of his surroundings.

"I want to thank you for inviting me to open this gorgeous garage," Hope said at the time.

Oaks said he thinks cutbacks to the basics were necessary more than three decades ago, and "it ended up being a square, brick building, which is functional, but it doesn't have eye appeal. So, a lot of the things that we're doing here are going to not only add functional space, which is the most important thing, but it's also going to give the building a whole new look."

Among changes underway or recently completed:

* First-floor bathrooms, being built in additions that stretch 30 feet to the north and south of the old outside walls.

* Second-floor food courts, also being built in those added sections. Portable concession stands will be used in the courts. Oaks said the north court could be used for convention overflow or private receptions.

* Doubling the size of the lobby, which will have carpeted floors, allowing more space for people lined up for a concert, perhaps eliminating the need for long waits outdoors, and also for registration and other pre-function events for conventions. And the stanchion-holders embedded in the existing terrazzo floor will no longer be there to trip over.

More room, views

* A concrete finish to the plaza between the PCCC and its parking deck. Having this area available will allow for events such as concerts, possibly with a stage set up on Washington Street, that could perhaps welcome 2,000 people in a standing, general-admission crowd.

* An open-air deck just off the north food court, where the “beautiful view” of part of downtown could also be a place for VIP viewing of concerts below, Oaks said. Levels of the parking garage facing the plaza could also be used as suites for concert viewing, he added.

* Completion of remodeling of lower-level meeting rooms. Depending on how dividers are used, there can be up to 16 rooms. Some are already finished and are being used, including for a meeting this week of participants in the international radon symposium of the American Association of Radon Scientists and Technologists. There is recessed lighting, updated room colors including brown, beige and green tones, and carpeting that is “very cleanable” and with patterns that can help “mask spills,” Oaks said.

The remodeling project should also cut off access to water that sometimes flooded some basement rooms, said Jeff Stuck, PCCC director of grounds and facilities. Building extensions are now over some areas that had been below sidewalks and support structures that held up the old canopy leading to the southwest entrance — allowing leaks.

* Design with better service in mind, including a rounded front to the box office in the lobby, so lines don’t all go straight back and block movement in the hall; and first-floor concession windows expanded and redirected toward the main hall instead of a hallway, again, allowing for lines that don’t fill the hall.

Oaks said there has already been an increase in spending at the windows because there are more points of sale and people don’t have to wait so long.

An extra 2,000

As part of the remodeling project, a small blockhouse that contained a bathroom accessible for the disabled, and another similar structure used for storage, were torn out and expanded the open view in the main hall. Second-floor bathrooms were also remodeled. And, Oaks said, the large bathrooms on the first floor will allow for larger crowds under state rules, meaning standing-room tickets could be sold for some popular shows and crowds could go from the typical 7,000 for a popular concert to the 9,000 range.

Not having first-floor bathrooms, Oaks said, is “one of our biggest complaints over the years.” Stuck said safety concerns when the building opened helped add to that problem. As planned, people in the bleacher-like risers were going to be able to walk up to the mezzanine level and use bathrooms there. But concerns that the risers couldn’t stand all the weight in an emergency, if people from the mezzanine were exiting downward, caused officials to close off access between the risers and the mezzanine. Gates that close off that access remain in place.

Oaks praised the three Springfield construction companies that have worked on the project. The final phase of more than \$7.58 million is being done by Evans Construction, and the bulk of earlier work was done by Halversen Construction, with R.L. Vollintine doing the the remainder, including remodeling work of administrative offices. The architectural firm Evan Lloyd Associates of Springfield handled project design.

Push to get done

Oaks said there’s a big push to get “as much done as possible” before the Oct. 25 appearance of Christian speaker **Beth Moore**. She drew the largest crowd in center history — 8,750 people — in 2009.

He said a “grand reopening week” is hoped for about the time that singer Brad Paisley is scheduled to perform, on Nov. 21.

The southward extension of the building only includes about a third of the length of the south wall. That would still allow for a potential future expansion of the convention center to the south, enveloping what is now the Sangamon County Complex’s parking lot.

There are not immediate plans for that, but Oaks said it would be beneficial, as more than one large convention could be handled simultaneously, or concerts could be scheduled even during conventions.

“Right now we miss out on a lot of events because our calendar is so full,” Oaks said, noting that for two years in a row, only Christmas and New Year weekends were open from late September to late May.

“The public is going to really like the changes to the convention center,” said Mike Coffey Jr., chairman of the elected board that oversees the building, which is supported in part by taxes. He predicted that over time, there will be a “big influx of people.”

“As the building got older, we started to lose some conventions due to newer facilities opening up all around us,” Coffey said. “I think with this remodel ... it’s going to revitalize the interest in the Prairie Capital Convention Center.”

He said while there are no immediate plans for the southward expansions, the design was done so it would fit into such a larger facility.

“Obviously, we’d love to do that,” Coffey said. “I’ve always thought that would be the best thing for the city. But we’ve got to go one step at a time. This is the first step.

“I think we’ll get a positive response from the public,” Coffey added. “And then, if the economy ever turns around and we can work something out with the city of Springfield, we would love to have more convention space. ... And everything’s laid out and designed to do that.”

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City, state add to funding

The \$15.8 million update of the Prairie Capital Convention Center received funding including:

- * \$4 million from the state of Illinois
- * \$5 million in tax increment financing funds collected by the city of Springfield for downtown redevelopment
- * \$6.8 million in bonds issued by the convention center.