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January 01, 2012 8:00 PM

## Auto show's support system

Structure, workers keep exhibits upright

By [Dustin Walsh](#)

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NATHAN SKID/CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

Cobo Center's load capacity is large but not unlimited, and it's the job of engineer Greg Chaves, sole proprietor of Chaves Associates Inc. in Clinton Township, to make sure exhibits don't bring down the house.

Greg Chaves paces the 725,000 square feet of show floor at **Cobo Center** at least four times a day. He has done this every day for the past month.

More than 1,200 structural engineers, electricians, carpenters and other laborers load, construct and erect the more than 40 exhibits inside Cobo's walls ahead of each **North American International Auto Show** -- beginning Nov.1.

### Going to the show?

The North American International Auto Show is coming to Cobo Center:

- **Press Preview:** Jan. 9-10
- **Industry Preview:** Jan. 11-12
- **Charity Preview:** Jan. 13
- **Public Show:** Jan. 14-22

Tickets can be purchased at [naias.com](http://naias.com) or Cobo:

- **Adults:** \$12 per person
- **Groups:** \$8 each with a purchase of 30 tickets or more

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It's Chaves' job -- as the sole proprietor of Clinton Township-based structural engineering firm **Chaves Associates Inc.** and contractor to Cobo -- to protect the building from structural damage. Light rigs exceeding the most elaborate Broadway spectacle hang from Cobo's ceiling, and 40-foot walls of shelved autos are raised on its floor, representing kilotons of load on the infrastructure.

- **Seniors:** \$6 (65 and older)
- **Children:** \$6 (7-12 years old; 6 and under free)

Rod Alberts, executive director of the NAIAS, estimates the total investment in exhibits, materials and labor for the show at \$100 million. More than 2,000 semis drop off and pick up materials before the show.

"The exhibitors bring in tons and tons of materials, and if they exceed load capacity, we're talking damage to Cobo's infrastructure," Chaves said. "The booth designers don't talk to each other, so if we're not diligently monitoring their construction, they could overload an area, which could be dangerous."

But making Chaves' job easier is Cobo's load capacity, said Thom Connors, general manager of Cobo Center.

"The amount of steel in the rigging grid permits the designers to do things that they just can't do at other facilities," he said. "This exhibit space is simply world class."

Cobo's steel ceiling joists can hold loads as heavy as a ton per 10-foot by 10-foot grid, Chaves said. Cobo's roof-top parking required the strong steel girders.

In past show exhibits, visitors witnessed heavy duty trucks as well as massive LED platforms suspended from the ceiling.

"Cobo's high ceiling has the greatest load capacity of any of the other major shows in the world," he said. "This really allows (exhibitors) to do their A-game structure here, something they can't do at other venues."

The other major North American auto shows take place in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Miami.

Laborers spend three weeks assembling, installing and raising the millions of dollars worth of lighting needed for the show, said Fred Tanari, president of Lincoln Park-based **Convention & Show Services Inc.** That's longer than the other North American shows to construct the entire show, he said.

"There are so many intricacies to these exhibits," he said. "There's lighting, flooring and wiring and a lot of other things happening that are taken for granted by the public but are a huge deal for us."

Convention & Show Services has overseen the show construction for the past 35 years.

Tanari has seen the auto show transform from a small retail convention -- the first auto show was in 1965 -- to the largest automotive production in North America. With that growth, exhibits became more elaborate.

"We used to move this show onto the floor in five days," he said. "The only things brought in were kiosks, turntables and carpet."

Now, the exhibitors -- **Ford Motor Co., General Motors Co., Toyota Motor Co.,** etc. -- spend an average of \$3 million to \$5 million on just the materials, he said.

Ford's double-deck structure at NAIAS 2012 is exclusive to Detroit because of Cobo's infrastructure, said Dwayne Lacanaria, global account director for Livonia-based **EWI Worldwide Inc.**, the creator of Ford's exhibit.

"Because of the massive weight of the structure, this is a Detroit-only portion of our exhibit," he said. "Cobo allows us to do things we can't do anywhere else."

The double-deck structure weighs 23,000 pounds.

EWI also produced the NAIAS exhibits for **Kia Motors, Coda Automotive Inc., Subaru and Bentley**. EWI estimates that revenue of \$103 million from its total \$160 million in revenue will come from auto show exhibits this year.

Chaves helped design the Ford exhibit as a contractor and has worked with several other exhibitors, so he's familiar with the dos-and-don'ts of exhibits.

And as Chaves walks the floor, he's consistently jotting notes about the use of steel and payloads for exhibits like Fords.

Walking through **Lincoln's** exhibit last week, Chaves said, "They plan on putting cars on top of this double-deck structure, which could crack the floor in other places, but not here."

Right now, the inside of Cobo Center is part war zone, part canvas with forklifts speeding through its vast corridors. The air is filled with sawdust and debris. But, by 6 a.m. on Jan. 9, crews will have vacated and the show will be fully operational, and safe, thanks to the work done by Chaves, Tanari and Lacanaria.

"This show is taking a great leap forward this year because of the industry recovery," Alberts said. "The work that goes into the show is unparalleled, and that's why the NAIAS is the elite auto show in this country."

Press days begin Jan. 9. Public days begin Jan. 14.

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**TIMOTHY DINAN** wrote:

Hopefully this is one one of the reasons other auto shows in LA or NY won't eclipse Detroit's show. How about the support the Auto Show lends to modeling industry and the fudge industry, too? I would estimate the coat check to be one of the biggest, too.

1/2/2012 9:18 AM EST

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