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October 05, 2011 3:47 PM

The evolution of a regional relationship: From pitching insults to pitching for ... Olympics?

By Matthew Gryczan



BLOOMBERG NEWS

Cobo Center's Thom Connors says of relations between the east and west sides of the state: "We are making progress. There are a number of reasons to be optimistic about cooperation between the two sides of the state."

When Thom Connors stepped off a chartered bus in Grand Rapids last Friday as part of a delegation aiming to forge stronger business ties between executives from the Detroit area and West Michigan, his visit was far from a courtesy call.

In his dual role as a regional vice president for **SMG** in Detroit and as general manager of **Cobo Center**, Connors has worked closely for the past eight months with Richard MacKeigan, the SMG regional general manager who oversees management of **Van Andel Arena**, **DeVos Performance Hall** and **DeVos Place** in Grand Rapids.

Connors sees the future of Detroit and Grand Rapids being intimately linked with SMG's statewide strategy: Persuade associations and large corporations that alternate between the east and west sides of Michigan for their annual gatherings to select Cobo and DeVos Place. West Conshohocken, Pa.-based SMG manages about 220 public assembly facilities around the world.

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"It's been very helpful for us in Detroit to use DeVos Place as an example of how SMG manages facilities, to tell prospective clients what they can expect of Cobo," said Connors, who took over management of the Detroit convention center late last year and is striving to turn its fortunes around. "Hopefully, we can bring client leads to DeVos as well."

Although the bus visit, sponsored by the **Detroit Regional Chamber** and **Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce**, was tagged "East Meeting West," Connors and others say the two sides of the state are well beyond the introduction stage.

"We are past getting to know each other," Connors said. "Now it is a matter of how we work together for the greater good of Michigan. We are making progress. There are a number of reasons to be optimistic about cooperation between the two sides of the state."

Detroit and West Michigan "used to throw grenades at each other," Grand Rapids Mayor George Heartwell told his guests at the beginning of the visit. "We don't do that anymore. There are 13 urban communities in the state of Michigan, and we have much more in common than matters that separate us."

The visit itself was an outcome of discussions between officials at the Detroit and Grand Rapids chambers during the Detroit chamber's **Mackinac Policy Conference** on Mackinac Island in early June, where they talked about creating better communication between the east and west sides of the state.

The June event on the island was marked by a more pronounced presence of West Michigan business leaders — so much so that Jim Dunlap, senior executive vice president of **Huntington Bank**, joked to the crowd visiting Grand Rapids this past Friday that "we felt like we invaded the Mackinac conference."

Noting the spirit of cooperation it fostered, Dunlap said, "We will be there every year now."

The visit to Grand Rapids was largely underwritten by *Crain's Detroit Business*, Grand Rapids-based **Priority Health** and **Warner Norcross & Judd LLP**. Participants had opportunities to learn more about the **ArtPrize** competition in Grand Rapids and visit the **GRid70** project and Van Andel Arena.

As the nearly 35 visitors from Detroit mixed with West Michigan executives throughout the day, the group came up with ideas that suggested little semblance of the east-west turf wars of years past.

David Frey, chairman of the **Frey Foundation** in Grand Rapids and co-chair of a community organization called **Grand Action**, floated the idea that Detroit should try to become the host city of the 2020 Summer Olympics, primarily as a way for the state to rally around Motown.

When Detroit civic leader and retired auto dealer Tarik Daoud informed the group at a luncheon that making a proposal to host the Olympics was once considered but determined to be too expensive, Grand Rapids developer Sam Cummings said he thought West Michigan could help fund the proposal.

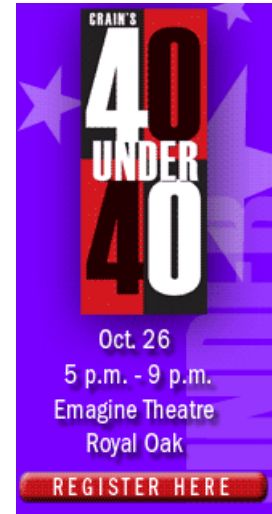
And after hearing that the **U.S. Olympic Committee** already has decided not to bid on the 2020 summer games, Frey flatly stated, "Then let's try for 2024."

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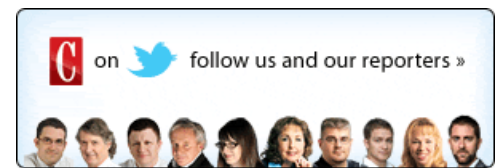
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