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## Putting Cobo center stage

Convention officials show off upgrades to fill venue's menu

By [Sherri Welch](#)

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Cobo Center — and much of metro Detroit — breathed a sigh of relief in January when the **Detroit Auto Dealers Association** announced a deal to keep the **North American International Auto Show** at the center for at least another five years.

The show is a huge economic driver for the region and a chance for both the carmakers and region to shine for the national and international press.

But it also represents an opportunity to sell another of the region's assets: Cobo itself.

"The cars are the stars ... but the auto show showcases — better than any event we could have here — Cobo's capabilities as a platform for a variety of events," said Thom Connors, regional vice president and general manager of Cobo Center for West Conshohocken, Pa.-based SMG.


The **Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau** and **Detroit Marriott Renaissance Center** hosted meeting planners, association executives, decision-makers for religious organizations, labor unions and social organizations and conventions/meeting trade show media for the black-tie Charity Preview. The idea is to present Cobo, Detroit and the region at its finest.

Cobo and the Detroit Marriott this year hosted about two dozen potential and existing clients for a "familiarization trip" wrapped around the auto show Charity Preview. Two out-of-town

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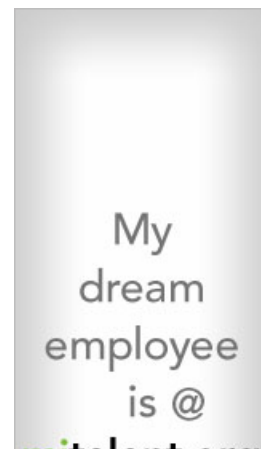
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journalists were also part of the mix.

"We had more people (for the trip) this year than last year," Connors said. "There's a great deal of interest."

The auto show "is one of the most impressive shows staged in North America," given the investments made in sizable exhibits and the work of display houses evidenced in the exhibits, Connors said.

"It gives us a chance to show off the things we'll do for them when they come for their event," from having the **Detroit Shoppe** in the Cobo lobby to booking local jazz bands, solo pianists, gospel choirs and other entertainers. And, it is hoped, the show helps give Detroit and Cobo an edge over its biggest trade show competitors: Indianapolis, Nashville, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Milwaukee, Minneapolis and Louisville, Connors said.

Marriott directly sells Cobo and markets it "because in some instances, we need their space," said Judy Booth, director of sales and marketing for the Detroit Marriott, in an email.

"We need them for the space, and they need us for the rooms. From there we can usually spin off overflow rooms to the other hotels."

The visitors bureau, which supported the familiarization trip effort, has not been able to invite its own group for the familiarization trip in the past few years because of budget constraints, said Larry Alexander, president and CEO of the CVB and chairman of the **Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority**.

"When we bring people to Detroit, we're selling the destination ... in conjunction with a very coordinated, committed ... team led by (the CVB)," Connors said.

Hotels, restaurants, transportation providers and entertainment venues also step up to make sure the out-of-town planners and decision-makers get a chance to see the best the city and region have to offer.

"We've got a great product to see," Connors said.

That includes everything from improvements in the convention center district — most notably the RiverWalk — new hotels, restaurants, clubs, the casinos, sporting events, the **Detroit Institute of Arts** to **The Henry Ford** in Dearborn and the contributions being made by the corporate community downtown.

"People want to be where people are. The more activity in and around a convention center, the more attractive it will be," Connors said.

**Bringing them back**

Cobo and the CVB aren't just targeting new clients. They're attempting to bring back clients who haven't been here in a number of years, Connors said.

"We're seeing a great deal of interest from former clients — specifically professional association conventions, many of them with a tie to the auto industry."

The organizations are pointing out such things as the change in Cobo's ownership with the new **Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority** and its commitment to improving the building — as evidenced by the \$299 million renovation currently under way and the change in Cobo management.

When planners are interested, they're given behind-the-scenes tours of Cobo so they can see firsthand the changes taking place.

"There's no question that Cobo had fallen on hard times ... that we lost a lot of groups in the past that no longer come because of deterioration of the facility," Alexander said.

"Now that (we) have this plan for renovation and improvement. we need to get the word out so we



COURTESY OF COBO CENTER

Planned upgrades at Cobo include a complete renovation of the lobby and meeting spaces, including a new food court.



can bring some of those conventions back."

The regional authority, which Alexander chairs, is working with the CVB and Cobo to develop a marketing strategy that it hopes to launch in March to communicate all of the changes taking place, he said.

### Upgrades

Cobo already has made infrastructure improvements, such as the installation of energy-efficient lighting and a complete upgrade of the heating system, Connors said. It's also expanded the exhibit space.

Other plans include enclosing the loading docks, a new atrium entrance at the Detroit River and Atwater, and the installation of a new, 38,000-square-foot ballroom.

Also planned is additional meeting room space set for 2013 in what used to be Cobo Arena, as well as a complete renovation of the remainder of the lobby and meeting spaces, including a new food court.

Cobo, which has an annual marketing budget of about \$200,000, hosted members of the **Metro Detroit Chapter of the International Special Events Society** during the public days of the auto show.

"Although those people are local, in the future we'll have the largest ballroom ... in Southeast Michigan, Connors said.

"And we're interested in booking local special events, galas and fundraisers."

Carol Galle, president of **Special D Events** in Royal Oak, said she's been keeping her ear to the ground for updates on Cobo's renovations, on behalf of clients.

The presentation for ISES "presented a clear picture of how the space will be laid out and the capacities," she said in an email. "I was particularly impressed with the ballroom and atrium spaces."

Special D manages many nonprofit gala dinners, breakfasts and other fundraisers, and Galle said there is a definite need for a larger ballroom in metro Detroit.

"To be honest, we have never been able to find the right fit for our clients at Cobo," she said. "I'm hopeful this transformation will change that pattern."

Cobo is also getting promising feedback from locals and out-of-town planners.

Delores Howard, assistant executive director of the Arlington, Va.-based **National Science Teachers Association**, which hosted a conference at Cobo in 2007, came in for this year's Charity Preview at the invitation of the Marriott.

"I had heard that Detroit was definitely a city that should be looked at again," based on chatter among meeting planners, Howard said.

"It was nice to see that the downtown was alive again — there were people roaming around after business hours, (and) it seemed like a much more comfortable place to be in terms of safety."

Howard said she was struck by the ease of traffic into Cobo's grounds, the beautification around the river, the center's brighter lighting, visible green efforts and the pride Cobo staff seemed to take in their work.

"I'd like to see what else happens at Cobo Center. ... I think Detroit could be a good deal, especially for educators," she said, given that flights, space costs and hotel room rates seem to be more affordable in Detroit than other markets.

"We weren't looking to (immediately) close deals; in many cases, there are ongoing conversations," Connors said. "We're (just) trying to get on their list for (request for proposals) for future dates."

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