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Cobo authority, unions agree to ease work rules

MICHAEL MARTINEZ THE DETROIT NEWS 11 COMMENTS



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Less restrictive work rules for exhibitors should make Cobo Center — which is being renovated — more competitive, Cobo officials say. (Max Ortiz/The Detroit News)

The Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority that runs Cobo Center said Thursday it has reached a “landmark agreement” with five labor unions that will “significantly reduce” how much exhibitors must pay to set up their booths.

Labor rules that tightly restrict how much work that exhibitors may do themselves in setting up at Cobo have long been a sore point. This new agreement should help [ease](#) that, and the lower costs may help attract more shows and conventions to Cobo.

“It is particularly gratifying that this agreement was reached through constructive engagement and serious negotiation rather than a legislative imperative,” said Patrick Bero, CEO/CFO of the convention authority. “Everyone is on board that these changes will be critical to Cobo Center reaching its full potential as an economic [engine](#) for the region and the state.”

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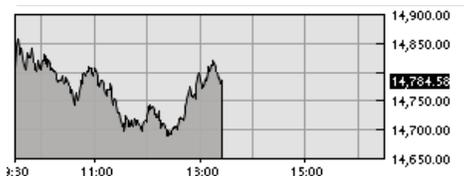
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The agreement “makes Cobo’s costs more competitive with standards for the exposition and meeting industry,” said Thom Connors, general manager of Cobo Center. “This is a significant step forward to clarify and maintain exhibitor rights and make our operations more efficient and competitive.”

In the past, union contractors had to perform even menial tasks like setting up individual booths and carrying brochures and product samples back and forth. With the new agreement, those union workers can leave those tasks to the exhibitors, and focus on larger, more important jobs.

Among the provisions:

- Exhibitors could save up to 33 percent on material handling labor.
- Straight-time is now an eight-hour period between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. Overtime previously kicked in at 3 p.m. The change could save 50 percent per worker-hour.
- Exhibitors may carry their brochures and product samples into and out of exhibits, if they do not require motorized equipment.
- Exhibitors may set up their own booth space up to 400 square feet — the equivalent of four, contiguous 10x10 booth spaces that have been combined.

The agreement covers all shows, meetings, conventions and exhibitions at Cobo. It was characterized as a work rules “efficiency memorandum” — not a contract.

Rod Alberts, executive director of the North American International Auto Show, said the changes will benefit the popular January car show.

“Our set up time is a month and a half,” he said. “When you’re talking price per hour and work rules, that has a big impact. Any little bit helps.”

Mike Mackool, one of the creators of Detroit Bike City, a yearly convention for the bicycle industry, said the rule changes might encourage his vendors to be more creative with their own displays.

“It’s huge news,” he said. “It’s a lot easier if people can handle more on their own.”

The changes come at a time when Cobo is gaining more attention as a national convention destination.

Connors recently told The Detroit News that convention bookings were up 18 percent from 2011-2012. This year, Cobo has been able to add new business and re-sign former accounts.

Cobo Center — whose ownership transferred from the city to the Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority in 2009 — remains the biggest player in Metro Detroit’s convention business. And its \$279 million renovations, set to be complete in 2015, will add to its marketing appeal.

“They’re getting things done we haven’t been able to accomplish in 23 years,” Alberts said. “I can’t tell you what a difference the authority has made. They’ve turned it all around.”

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