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On the Turnaround

By [Michael Hart](#)

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When the 2013 North American International Auto Show opened its doors Jan. 14, Cobo Center was more than halfway through a five-year, \$299-million renovation and expansion project that already had included infrastructure improvements, more than 22,000 square feet of new exhibit space and reconstructed parking garages.

Over the next two weeks, 800,000 people visited the show and the center. Then, once the last attendee left the building on Jan. 27, workers were back on the job, ready to complete the massive project. By the time the 2014 car show opens, it will be in a virtually new Cobo Center.

That's when the venue will debut an upgraded look showcasing its prime waterfront location. A three-story, glass atrium will be the focal point for the center, giving attendees clear views of the Detroit River as well as a seamless connection from the main hall to the lower-level exhibition area.

This comes on the heels of the center signing a five-year agreement last year to hold the famous Detroit car show at the venue annually through at least 2017. And SMG, which has managed Cobo since late 2010, has signed the American Society of Association Executives Annual Meeting for 2015 and the Service Employees International Union Convention in 2016.

Last year, Cobo's events business more than doubled to \$200 million, compared with \$94 million in 2011, according to the Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau. This year, CVB officials say, event visitors may book up to 280,000 room nights in downtown Detroit and, by 2015, room nights will reach 400,000.

All of this might appear to be a puzzler, given the city of Detroit's highly publicized financial problems and its hand-off to an "emergency manager" who has wide-ranging authority to make drastic changes to municipal government.

Cobo was turned over to the state of Michigan in 2009 however, when the Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority was created to run the center. With Michigan's backing, SMG was hired to manage the venue a year later.



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