

With hotel open, focus now is on landing more conventions

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By [Alexandra Clough](#) and [Jennifer Sorentrud](#) - Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

With the long-awaited convention center hotel now open for business, attention now turns to luring business. Already on the horizon: a state hurricane conference for three years starting in 2017.

Hundreds of county tourism leaders, elected officials and local residents attended a ceremony Friday morning to mark the [Hilton West Palm Beach's grand opening](#), filling a decade-old void that county leaders have argued is critical to both the tourism industry and the businesses in downtown West Palm Beach.



A view of the Palm Deck at the grand opening of the Hilton hotel that is connected to the Palm Beach ... [Read More](#)

Before the hotel opened, the convention center was limited to competing for events that would generate a maximum of about 450 nightly hotel bookings, said Dave Anderson, the convention center's general manager.

But when Hilton's 400 rooms are combined with those at other nearby hotels, including the West Palm Beach Marriott, the Hyatt Place and the Residence Inn in downtown West

Palm Beach, Anderson said his sales team can vie for much larger events.

Add in the convention center's proximity to CityPlace, area beaches, and Palm Beach International Airport, and Anderson said there are "really few cities that are comparable."



Bruce Warwick, Related vice president, Stephen Ross, Related founder, John Parkinson, Hilton general manager, Hal Veleche, county commissioner and Gopal Rajegowda, ... [Read More](#)

He added that as construction advanced on the 12-story hotel, his staff saw a surge in the number of meeting planners interested in holding their events here. During the past 8 to 10 months, convention center employees have been holding sight tours for perspective clients on a weekly basis, Anderson said.

"We are getting groups that have really passed Palm Beach County by over the last 10 years," Anderson said.

Stephen Ross, owner of the Miami Dolphins football team and chairman of [the Related Cos.](#), a [CityPlace](#) owner and developer of the hotel, told the crowd [the 400-room, 12-story building](#) has been part of the company's vision for downtown West Palm Beach for more than a decade.



Bruce Warwick, Related vice president, Stephen Ross, Related founder, John Parkinson Hilton general manager and shakes hands with Gopal Rajegowda, Related ... [Read More](#)

"I don't think there is anybody here more excited than I am to have this ribbon-cutting today," Ross said. "We have been looking forward to this hotel being built for at least the past 15 years... Today we really proud to be here to celebrate this because I think it really kind of rounds out CityPlace and the convention center and really will allow all of the economic development opportunities that are available here in Palm Beach County."

Palm Beach County commissioners chose Related Cos. as the developer in 2010. Two years later, the commission agreed to cover \$27 million of the estimated \$110 million hotel construction cost.

Construction began on the hotel in 2014, ending more than a decade of setbacks that prevented the building from rising in downtown West Palm Beach.



The lobby of the Hilton. The grand opening of the Hilton hotel that is connected to the Palm Beach County Convention ... [Read More](#)

"This has been a long, hard project," Palm Beach County Mayor Mary Lou Berger told the crowd Friday. "The results are outstanding."

The hotel welcomed its first guests on Friday. More than half of its rooms had already been booked for Monday night, Hilton officials said.

The convention center opened in 2003 but has struggled without a connected hotel to house conference attendees.

Event planners, especially those organizing large national conferences, look for meeting space that also offers convenient lodging for their guests. That's because it can be difficult and costly to transport hundreds of meeting-goers from off-site hotels.

Having a hotel connected to the convention center is already helping tourism officials compete for large convention business.



Photos: Hilton Grand Opening 01-29-2016

After visiting the hotel while it was still under construction this past year, state officials agreed to hold the governor's annual hurricane conference at the convention center for a 3-year period beginning in 2017. The three-year deal is expected to result in roughly 10,000 nightly hotel bookings, a record-breaker for the convention center, according to officials with [Discover The Palm Beaches](#), the county's official tourism marketing organization.

Business leaders, meanwhile, praised the hotel's expected impact on the local economy.

Not only will the hotel boost the fortunes of the convention center, it also will help the downtown, said Brad Capas of CapasGroup Realty Advisors in Fort Lauderdale.

People who attend conventions likely will come back, perhaps through business expansions or relocation, he said.

"It's a great way to seed future business over the long term," said Capas, who has brokered a number West Palm Beach real estate deals.

This "seeding" effect is especially important now that real estate developers are starting to plan new office buildings downtown. They need new tenants to fill the new office space planned.

In addition, convention center attendees also are likely to return as tourists and even future residents, Capas said.

"When you increase the number of visitors to that facility, it has a ripple effect over time to benefit the economy as a whole and downtown West Palm Beach in particular," he said.

Dennis Grady, president of the [Chamber of Commerce of the Palm Beaches](#), said he expected a number of positive economic effects from the convention center hotel's opening, and the larger conferences the convention center will now be able to draw.

Restaurants and shops, especially at the CityPlace shopping and dining destination on the north side of Okeechobee Boulevard, naturally will see the greatest effect.

Beyond CityPlace, Grady expects other restaurants downtown, such as those in the Clematis Street district and over the bridge to Palm Beach, to benefit from the convention's centers rebirth as a destination for large-scale events.

But Grady added that meeting planners who organize conventions don't just limit themselves to exploring the immediate surroundings of a convention center.

They often look outside the immediate district and ask, "What else is there to do?" Grady said.

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So tourist destinations throughout the county likely will benefit, too he said.

By the Numbers

400: The number of hotel rooms

200: The number of hotel employees

\$1,500-\$1,800: The nightly rate for the hotel's 1,500-square-foot presidential suite

1,300: The number of pieces of artwork at the hotel

9,000 pounds: The weight of the chandelier on display in the hotel's lobby