

UW Conference Center opens as destination

-Wyoming Business Report: Dennis E. Curran

Laramie, Wyoming (March 7, 2008) – The new University of Wyoming Conference Center and the adjacent Hilton Garden Inn Hotel have both opened for business ahead of schedule. And Laramie promoters are hoping the two, along with several other new hotel properties nearby, will put the college town back on the map as a destination for meetings, conferences and conventions.

The 13,000-square-foot conference center, just east of UW's War Memorial Stadium, is designed to accommodate more than 900 guests for meetings and more than 500 for banquets and special events.

The five-story, 135-room Hilton Garden Inn, next door to the conference center at 22nd Street and Grand Avenue, includes a Great American Grill restaurant, which serves breakfast, lunch and dinner. It also offers an indoor recreational center with pool and exercise facilities and two complete business centers with complimentary Internet services.

Together, the hotel and conference center are part of a four-block long, nine-acre commercial and retail development known as UW Plaza that will feature restaurants, professional offices, and a variety of retail stores.

"I am delighted that this long-awaited center is opening for business," UW President Tom Buchanan said before a Feb. 4 ribbon-cutting ceremony. "This attractive area will provide essential services and generate revenue for the university and the Laramie community."

The \$15 million Hilton Garden Inn is owned and managed by Hotel Investment Services of Troy, Mich., on land leased to it by UW. The conference center, estimated to cost \$8.2 million, was built using funds donated to the university through the UW Foundation, which owns the center. Donors include the McMurry Foundation and the estate of UW alumna Clara Toppan. HIS will manage the center under an agreement with UW.

Financing for the hotel and conference center was arranged in part by the Wyoming Business Council, which guided the developers to enabling funding opportunities.

The retail space along Grand Avenue is being developed by Grand Avenue Land Partners LLC, and marketed by Wheeler Commercial Property Services LLC, of Fort Collins, Colo.

Delta Construction, a design-build general contractor with offices in Laramie, Fort Collins and Steamboat Springs, Colo., was the general contractor for both the hotel and conference center. GSG Architects of Casper designed the two buildings.

Real plus

The new facilities are seen as a real plus for the university and the community by community promoters.

"I look at the UW Convention Center as a great marketing tool," said Karen M. Gibbons, interim director of the Laramie Economic Development Corp. "To have businesses that might not have made the trip to Laramie suddenly come in here and experience one of our blue-sky days and how friendly everybody is, they'll say, 'I could live here, I could move my business here, this would be a good place to be.'"

"For people who had been here 20-30 years ago, this isn't the Laramie they used to know," she added. "So bringing them down here and letting them see the accommodations and services we have, along with the university atmosphere and yet having a hometown atmosphere, this can be very appealing to them."

Both Gibbons and Fred Ockers, head of the Albany County Convention and Visitors Bureau, say the opening of the hotel and conference center, along with additional hotel space nearby, makes Laramie more of a destination than it was before.

"I think Laramie may have added more rooms than anybody," Ockers said. "With the new hotels, we've added almost 700 rooms to our inventory."

Along with the Hilton Gardens, Laramie has a new Holiday Inn, a new AmericInn and Suites and a two-year-old Hampton Inn east of the convention center. A Fairfield Inn by Marriott is under construction west of Laramie, which, when completed, will give the area about 1,800 rooms available, Ockers said.

He noted that the conference center will complement existing meeting facilities in the Memorial Union, Crane-Hill Cafeteria and, for large venues, the Arena-Auditorium and even War Memorial Stadium.

"With the private and public meeting space around Laramie, we have a really nice inventory of meeting and conference space that we can attract people to Laramie, and now we can accommodate them with a much larger inventory of rooms," he said.

About Hilton Garden Inn & UW Conference Center

The Laramie Hilton Garden Inn and University of Wyoming Conference Center is conveniently located just two hours from Denver Colorado and 30 minutes from the Snowy Mountains. Offering access to Vedauwoo Recreational Park, the Snowy Mountains and just across the street from the University of Wyoming War Memorial Stadium and The Arena for sporting events. This brand new facility offers a premier location for overnight stays, gourmet dining, corporate conferences, weddings, receptions, executive meetings, charity galas, special events and golf outings. Our luxury hotel offers the finest accommodations. Just minutes from Jacoby Golf Course providing a relaxing respite from the daily pace. Our beautiful ballrooms and conference rooms make every occasion extraordinary. The Great American Grill serves delicious, distinctive cuisine. Flawless service makes every event remarkable.

For more information about the Hilton Garden Inn & UW Conference Center, please visit: <http://www.uwconferencecenter.com>

About Hospitality Investment Services

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To learn more about HIS's expertise in the hospitality industry, visit <http://www.his-corp.com>

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