

Add Laramie to Wyoming convention cities

-Wyoming Business Report: Dennis E. Curran

Laramie, Wyoming (May 7, 2008) – Attention Wyoming business event and convention planners! Laramie is (back) on the map for meetings, conferences and conventions.

With the new University of Wyoming Conference Center open for business and an array of new convention-ready hotels, the state's lone university town is ready to play host to events large and small from across the state and region.

"We feel very fortunate to have it all come online basically all at the same time, within a few years," says Fred Ockers, director of the Albany County Tourism Board. "I know that other communities in the state are receiving a lot of attention, too, but it's nice that we're in the game again, so to speak."

In a way, Laramie was never really out of the game because of the university's draw, but the new hotels and conference center add first-class facilities to the mix once again. Ockers says that's key to the community's resurgence as a major player in the convention trade.

"We're excited about it and I think the hoteliers are excited about it," he said in an interview. "We're looking forward to growth and attracting more people. We hope people will see Laramie as a destination as well as a gateway."

The UW Conference Center, which opened in early February, is a 13,000-square-foot conference and event center located just east of War Memorial Stadium in a larger public-private partnership development called UW Plaza.

The conference center was the brainchild of former UW President Phillip Dubois, who said the university was lacking a hotel-convention center facility to attract top-flight academic conferences and gatherings.

Additions to the mix

UW officials say the new center is the perfect addition to a facilities mix that includes the Student Union ballroom (around 10,000 square feet), the Crane-Hill Cafeteria Complex (nearly 15,000 square feet), and for larger venues such as concerts, the Arena Auditorium and even the football stadium itself.

"The addition of the conference center is huge," Ockers said, and provides "a really nice inventory of meeting and conference space that can attract people to Laramie."

Equally important are the new hotels, which have nearly doubled Laramie's rooms for overnight visitors.

"Now we can accommodate them with a much larger inventory of rooms, so that's going to help, too," Ockers said.

In the last year or so, Laramie has added nearly 700 rooms. The latest to open are the Hilton Garden Inn, adjacent to the Conference Center and the AmericInn, a little farther east on Grand Avenue. A new Holiday Inn opened last fall at the east end of UW Plaza, the nearby Hampton Inn is just two years old, and a new Fairfield Inn by Marriott is rising on Laramie's northwest side, just west of Interstate 80.

"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, and with the Fairfield, we'll have around 1,800 rooms, in every price range."

"We think we have a really great situation in Laramie for people to come, whether it be for athletics or conventions or conferences or cultural events," he added. "And now we have a new inventory of rooms to welcome people to our area."

Karen Gibbons, director of the Laramie Economic Development Corp., said people would be drawn to Laramie by the university, its conference center and its extracurricular activities as well as the general quality of life in Laramie.

"You don't get lost in the masses here, and you can make a difference," she said. "Safety's not an issue, and you can walk away

from the basketball games at night and not worry about getting to your car. Those are all things that we pretty much take for granted.

"You have to come experience it to really understand it ... and for people who had been here 20-30 years ago, this isn't the Laramie they used to know," she added. "Bringing them down here and letting them see the new accommodations and services, along with the university atmosphere along with a hometown atmosphere, this can be very appealing."

Gibbons said she sees the UW Conference Center as "a great marketing tool," and "the new hotels will help generate new people coming to Laramie."

Marketing many attractions

The Albany County Tourism Board, meanwhile, is marketing the many attractions of Laramie and Albany County.

"We're trying to promote the area and activities that people can do in the area, whether it be winter sports - snowmobiling, skiing, cross-country skiing snowshowing - to summertime activities, fishing, biking, hiking and fishing, and of course hunting is always a mainstay," Ockers said.

The mountain lodges in the Snowy Range west of Laramie also is part of the mix. "We call them our jewels in the mountains," he said.

"Of course, the university is always going to be an attraction," he added, noting that new projects at UW such as the National Center for Atmospheric Research, the proposed UW partnership with GE Energy, and the new DKRW gasification project near Hanna also will help draw people and meetings to Laramie.

"We just see it as a positive thing moving forward," he said. "The fact we have these new properties allows us to promote these activities in our area and be able to accommodate these people when they stay here.

"We can finally compete (with other destinations in the state)," Ockers added. "Laramie will put its best foot forward, and the word will go out around, not only in the state but in the region, that we're able to do that."

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>

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