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Convention centre hits big time

\$180-M expansion to make it one of Canada's largest

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*Wayne Glowacki / Winnipeg Free Press
Klaus Lahr, president and CEO, Winnipeg Convention Centre speaks to reporters about the convention centre's \$180-million-plus expansion.*



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The curtain was finally lifted Tuesday on a \$180-million-plus addition to the Winnipeg Convention Centre that will nearly double its size and add another iconic structure to the downtown.

A crowd of more than 500 people, including many of the political and business elite, was on hand for the unveiling, which was emceed by Kids in the Hall comedian Kevin McDonald.

WCC president and CEO Klaus Lahr said excavation work will begin before the end of the year or early in January and the project is expected to take three years to complete.

More than a decade in the making -- that's how long Lahr has been lobbying for it -- the three-storey addition will add another 340,000 square feet to the existing 492,000-square-foot facility. That will make it the fourth-largest publicly owned convention centre in Canada behind Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver.

Officials said its size and amenities will attract much larger conventions -- ones with 3,000 delegates -- and tens of millions of dollars in business.

Marina James of Economic Development Winnipeg told the crowd convention delegates spend four times more than leisure visitors -- an average of \$953 per stay -- on transportation, hotels, dining and shopping. "An expanded convention centre means increased visitation to Winnipeg and increased employment for Winnipeggers, especially our youth," she added.

Lahr and government officials said the expansion is expected to trigger a number of other new downtown projects, including two new hotels adjacent to the convention centre.

*An artist's depiction of the bigger convention centre over York Avenue.
(ARCHITECTURAL DRAWING)*

One is believed to be a new \$15-million, seven-storey, 108-room Lakeview Hotel that Winnipeg's Lakeview Management Inc. plans to build on a surface parking lot it owns immediately west of the existing convention centre.

Lakeview CEO Jack Levit said construction on the year-long project will begin in February.

But no one would reveal where the second hotel is likely to be built, or who is likely to build it. Lahr said that's up to the private sector but he'd like it to be connected to the convention centre via a skywalk and to have at least 250 to 300 rooms.

There has been speculation the other hotel might be built on the site of the Carleton Inn, north of the convention centre on Carleton Street. But Lahr said he doesn't know what sites are being considered.

The convention centre project's design team -- Winnipeg's Number Ten Architectural Group and LM Architectural Group -- vowed the addition, with its glass-walled City Room exhibition space above York Avenue, will add a new "wow factor" to the downtown.

"The exposure of the facility interior to the street, punctuated by the large windows of the City Room, is precedent-setting," said Terry Cristall, senior project manager for Number Ten.

"There is no doubt the expansion... will add an electric vibrancy to our downtown and re-establish the Winnipeg Convention Centre as a leader in their industry."

Levit said there is enough room on Lakeview's property for a second, even larger hotel -- one with up to 15 floors. But the company wants to wait to see if someone else builds a new downtown hotel in the area and see how successful the WCC is in attracting new convention business before deciding whether to proceed with its second project.

"I'm leaving my options open," he added.

James said more than \$2 billion is being spent on new convention infrastructure and attractions in Winnipeg, and the WCC expansion is the icing on the cake.

"With a new airport terminal, Canadian Museum for Human Rights, Investors Group Field, changes to the Assiniboine Park and Assiniboine Park Zoo, the return of the NHL, major retailers opening shop and new full-service and boutique hotels breaking ground, there's an investment being made in Winnipeg and our future," she added.

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Winnipeg Convention Centre expansion project

The three-storey addition will be built on a former provincially owned surface parking lot immediately south of the convention centre and extend over York Avenue to connect to the existing structure.

The main floor will include a 36,499-square-foot lobby, concourse and registration area, and a 26,000-square-foot ballroom, which can be divided into four separate meeting rooms and act as a self-contained convention centre.

The third floor will include 147,100 square feet of contiguous exhibition space that can accommodate more than 700 exhibit booths.

The third-floor 46,000-square-foot City Room to be built over York Avenue will feature a full wall of windows on the east and west sides. It will accommodate 2,800 people for a sit-down dinner and dance, or 217 exhibit booths for a trade show.

The street-level plaza on York Avenue will be designed to function as a new weather-protected gathering place.

There will be a one-level, 150-stall underground parkade built under the new building.

The federal government is contributing \$46.6 million toward the cost of the project, and the city and province are each kicking in \$51 million. The balance of the funding will come from new incremental property tax revenues from the adjacent hotel development and from revenue generated by the Winnipeg Convention Centre.

The builder is Stuart Olson Dominion Constuction Ltd.

-- source: Winnipeg Convention Centre

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