

Palm Beach County's long-awaited convention center hotel opens Friday

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Palm Beach County's first convention center hotel opens. The new 400-room Hilton West Palm Beach hotel opens to its first guests on Friday, January 29, 2016.



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The Hilton West Palm Beach has created about 200 hotel jobs

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Palm Beach County's long-awaited convention center hotel will open Friday.

The new Hilton West Palm Beach represents the missing piece in the master plan for CityPlace, the popular
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complete.

"We're excited. Our ribbon-cutting is Friday," General Manager John Parkinson said Thursday during a sneak preview. "Our team members are lined up. They're ready to go."

The 400-room hotel includes 43 suites, a fitness center, landscaped pool area with private cabanas and more than 24,000 square feet of meeting space including two ballrooms, several smaller conference rooms and two outdoor event lawns.

Food and beverage outlets include Provisions, a grab-and-go marketplace; the Manor restaurant, serving breakfast, lunch and dinner; and the Galley bar and lounge.

"We will welcome some paying guests [Friday], and then we've also got a large group that's coming to West Palm Beach for the first time and they'll start arriving Saturday," Parkinson said.

That group — Thermo Fisher — is staying for a week and has about 150 rooms booked on peak nights, he said.

The Hilton, at 600 Okeechobee Blvd., is connected to the **Palm Beach County** Convention Center by a covered, enclosed air-conditioned walkway.

Shortly after the convention center opened in January 2004, county officials began the push for a headquarters hotel. Having a hotel on site was considered a critical component to the convention center's overall success and ability to attract large conventions, meetings and groups.

In 2010, county commissioners selected Related Cos., which developed CityPlace, to build the hotel. Related is headed by Miami Dolphins' owner Stephen Ross.

The county provided about \$27 million in subsidies to help finance the new hotel, while Related footed the majority of its costs.

Prior efforts to build the hotel had been plagued by construction delays and controversy before Related was tapped as its developer.

"The meeting planners are very excited about it because we haven't had a hotel connected to the convention center since it was built," Parkinson said. The hotel is generating first-time business to the area, he said. "Of the group business we have on the books right now, 90 percent of it is new — never been to West Palm Beach before."

The hotel is accepting bookings for individual stays on or after Feb. 6 through Hilton Worldwide's reservations website. A website check Thursday showed room rates starting at \$209 for the night of Feb. 6.

Tourism officials have estimated that at 75 percent occupancy the Hilton could bring 36,000 annual customers to **Palm Beach County**, spending nearly \$20 million

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omic activity over 10 years, according to county

Some 200 employees were hired at the hotel, mostly from the West Palm Beach area, Parkinson said.

The Hilton overall is expected to attract a mix of group and leisure business and was deliberately designed to have that balanced appeal, said Gopal Rajegowda, a vice president for Related Cos. who oversaw development of the \$125 million project.

"It's an unconventional convention hotel," Rajegowda said of its contemporary design, which showcases nautical elements and natural colors. "It's a great lifestyle hotel that's fun to be at."

The hotel's decor also includes 1,300 pieces of artwork dotted around rooms and public spaces, including work by a handful of South Florida artists. Other local influences include hotel beds made in West Palm Beach and curated food and beverage menus and programs by West Palm Beach chef Matthew Byrne.

"The new Hilton West Palm Beach opens up an entirely new universe of opportunities to host larger events in our community," said Jorge Pesquera, president and CEO for Discover The Palm Beaches, the county's official tourism marketing corporation.

"This hotel will be South Florida's only hotel that is structurally connected to a convention center, which really gives us a competitive advantage as a very desirable destination in the meetings and convention market," Pesquera said. "It's truly a game-changer for The Palm Beaches as we build our reputation as a mid-size convention destination."

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