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# PRESS-REGISTER

## Hotel seen as spur for convention bookings

**Hampton will boost sagging trade with addition of 150 quality rooms to downtown Mobile, officials say**

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A planned 150-room Hampton Inn & Suites at the corner of Royal and Conti streets will be a big boost for a convention trade that is hurting for new or updated hotel rooms, according to Leon Maisel, president of the Mobile Bay Convention & Visitors Bureau.

"We're right now overcoming some bad baggage from a very long time of having a poor hotel product," he said.

The influx of quality rooms coming on line in the next two years is expected to change the city's convention image and bring top conventions to the Arthur R. Outlaw Mobile Convention Center, according to Maisel and hotel owners.

By spring 2008, there will be more than 1,000 hotel rooms downtown for conventions, he said. There are about 6,000 hotel rooms citywide.

Construction should start in May on the seven-story Hampton Inn, which could open in summer 2008, according to developer Mike Cowart of Cowart Hospitality Services in Birmingham.

Among the other downtown hotels that will sport new or updated guest rooms, lobbies and meeting space are a pair of four-star Renaissance brand hotels on Royal Street: the 250-room Battle House Hotel set to open May 1, and the 375-room Riverview Plaza, which is undergoing a \$60 million renovation and should be complete this summer. Both are owned by an affiliate of the Retirement Systems of Alabama, the state's \$26 billion pension fund based in Montgomery.

Also, the owners of the 192-room Lafayette Plaza Hotel, at 301 Government St., are renovating the entire facility and expect to soon have a Holiday Inn brand. The owners of the 170-room Radisson Admiral Semmes Hotel on Government Street are planning the addition of 200 rooms on land behind the hotel.

Downtown room rates average \$80 per night, while citywide the hotel room rates average from the low \$60s to the low \$70s per night, according to hotel and convention bureau officials.

The upscale Renaissance hotel rates will change the mix, averaging in the low \$200s per night, according to Jeff

Mayers, general manager of the 28-story Riverview at 64 S. Water St.

"We're trying to up-sell the market and get the

higher-end customers," Maisel said. "Now we will be able to get them."

The Hampton's room rates, including suites with balconies for viewing Mardi Gras parades, will average \$125 to \$150 per night, Cowart said.

"I can tell you the Riverview and the Battle House managers are as happy as we are about the Hampton coming here," Maisel said. The Hampton's room rates will offer a mid-priced alternative to convention-goers, he said.

The Hampton "will be a wonderful addition," Mayers said.

Hampton's developer, Cowart, said he had looked for land to build a hotel in downtown Mobile for almost five years. "I was waiting for the right time and the right site," he said. "The RSA development was a real big catalyst."

The developers have a contract to buy a total of

1.5 acres, including the Republic parking lot at Royal and Government streets, which will be turned into a parking deck for hotel guests, according to Cowart. Retail space is planned for some of the land fronting Royal and Conti street. The land purchase will be finalized in mid-May, he said.

The owner-developers are the Edmonds family based in Brent, Ala., who own a chain of hotels and restaurants, Cowart said. They have Hampton Inns under construction in Florence and in Jasper; they also own the Windwood Inn in Bay Minette.

The Hampton's amenities will include an exercise room, business center, a convenience store, meeting rooms for as many as 200, an outdoor pool, courtyard and outdoor fireplace. The hotel was designed by LLW Architects in Memphis, Tenn., a firm that specializes in Hampton and Hilton hotels, he said.

Mobile's downtown district on a riverfront with historic districts nearby is a rare find today, according to Cowart.

"One of the problems with downtown Mobile was that there were not any nice hotels," he said. "The convention center is pretty nice, but it's hard to get to. It took somebody like RSA to come in. They don't worry about making the mortgage payment. Now you could attract conventions to the area and people would stay downtown ."

Elizabeth Sanders, executive director of the Downtown Mobile Alliance, said the downtown hotel market has changed substantially since the early 1990s, when the city was "desperately chasing hotel rooms.

"Now, the hotel industry seems to be going gang-busters," she said.

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