

Conference center opens

Taxpayers inspect city-owned center

The Eugene Conference Center threw its doors wide open Saturday to the people who made it possible — Eugene's taxpayers.

More than 1,000 Eugenians, just some of the citizens whose tax dollars went to foot the \$5.4 million tab of the city-owned center, toured the quietly elegant facility. The 16,300 square foot conference center is part of a \$34.2 million Civic Center that includes the Eugene Hilton Hotel and the Eugene Performing Arts Center, which is scheduled to open in September.

Visitors gorged themselves on cookies and fruit punch at linen-covered tables in the Playwrights Hall and the Composers Hall, which can be divided into multiple rooms, named for the likes of John Steinbeck, Tennessee Williams, Scott Joplin and John Phillips Souza.

The opening was accorded all the usual fanfare, with speeches and door prizes. Later, under subtle chandelier lighting, visitors danced on hardwood floors to the sounds of the Oregon Jazz Lab Band 1.

Some, like children in a candy store, explored the conference halls, admiring the muted blue and dusky rose hues of the decor and inspecting the electronic partitions that divide or expand a hall's size with the press of a button.

But just because the center looks expensive doesn't mean it cost an arm and a leg, says Angus Anderson, the city's business manager for the conference and performing arts centers.

"The city spent, not the extra bucks, but the extra two or three pennies to make it look nice. And it's still going to look nice in three years."

Anderson says he hopes those extra pennies pay off by drawing conference customers.

"What we're trying to do is get a good mix of local and outside uses because outside uses bring the dollars into Oregon," he says. "And that's the whole reason for its (the center's) being here — to bring in new dollars."

That strategy appears to be working, Anderson says.

The center's books show about 500 events scheduled so far for the remainder of the 1982 year, and already more than 800 are planned for 1983, he says.

The month of April is booked for 96 individual events by 54 different users, and only three days are left unscheduled, he says.

"So far we've been in use every day this month," Anderson says.

He estimates that every conference goer spends an average \$120 a day here. For the approximately 3,000 attendance days since the conference center opened for business in March, that multiplies out to \$360,000, "which are dollars that wouldn't have been spent here otherwise," Anderson says.

Who are the center's patrons? Pacific Northwest Bell plans to hold a conference here, and the Pacific Northwest Power Buyers, which usually holds annual meetings in different locations each year, decided to return to the Eugene center for the next three years, he says.

"They passed up places like Portland, Seattle, Spokane and Reno to come here," Anderson says. "So we are competitive."



A young Eugenian checks for hidden flaws in a new sculpture on display at the Eugene Convention Center.

Next year, when the performing arts center is in full swing, that competitiveness will be enhanced, he adds.

While the center's business comes predominately from the Pacific Northwest, it does draw some users from outside that area, he says.

The prime example is Nike Corporation, which plans to hold its annual meeting at the Eugene facility. "That's a worldwide one (event)."

The kinds of uses vary from meetings and conferences to banquets and dances, but response generally has been overwhelming, he says.

"We had three high school proms booked here on the same night, but we said 'Wait a minute — that's too much.' So now, we're just having two," Anderson says.

Concern that the conference center, which has a maximum capacity of 2,000 people, will steal business from the Lane County Convention Center is unwarranted, he says.

"This was built to complement rather than compete with the convention center."

The convention center, located at the Lane County Fairgrounds, is suited for large conference events, while the conference center is tailored for smaller, more personalized meetings, Anderson says.

"You couldn't bring a tractor in here," he says, his eyes sweeping the conference center. "But then again, this is a much better place for a meeting of 25 people."

Story by Marian Green
Photos by Erich Boekelheide



These taxpayers, among 1,000 who attended Saturday's gala public opening took advantage of free cookies, punch, jazz music and the sights of the \$5.4 million convention center.

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