

Bigger Hilton hotel to open early, by fall 2012

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The Hilton hotel to be built across from the Greater Columbus Convention Center is going to be bigger and open sooner than originally planned, local leaders learned yesterday.

The \$140 million hotel is expected to have 532 rooms, up from the original 500, and to be completed by early fall 2012, a couple of months earlier than previously expected, consultant Jeff Sachs and architect Todd Holamka of HOK told convention-center officials and Franklin County commissioners.

HOK and Columbus-based Moody Nolan, the project's architects, unveiled designs yesterday showing the 10-story building with a glass and brick facade in keeping with the look of the adjacent Arena District. The interior will be defined by a soaring atrium designed to let in as much sunlight as possible.

Other features will include a 12,000-square-foot ballroom and a restaurant with seating for up to 400 people. A small coffee shop near the hotel's High Street entrance also is planned.

Franklin County commissioners were pleased with what they saw, with Commissioner John O'Grady calling the hotel "another great project for Downtown."

The hotel is being publicly financed, with Franklin County backing the bonds for the project.

The county also agreed to put \$8 million into a contingency fund as a revenue guarantee in the event the hotel does not meet projections. The city of Columbus separately agreed to reserve up to \$1.4 million in parking-meter revenue and to forgo the usual bed taxes on the hotel.

Sachs told the convention authority's hotel-development committee yesterday that the hotel is expected to generate \$25.9 million in revenue in 2013, its first full year in operation. The projection assumes an occupancy rate of 61.5 percent, with an average daily room rate of \$135.

The Franklin County Convention Facilities Authority has long controlled the site, on the west side of High Street near the corner of Nationwide Boulevard.

Columbus convention officials consider the hotel crucial to their ability to attract and retain large conventions, and they have lobbied for years for a new full-service hotel near the convention center.

One design feature shown yesterday — an elevated pedestrian walkway across High Street connecting the hotel with the convention center — generated some reaction.

Curt Moody of Moody Nolan said Mayor Michael B. Coleman was not thrilled with the idea but was "open" to considering it.

"He said, 'I just brought one down,'" said Moody, referring to a pedestrian bridge that was connected to the Columbus City Center mall, which is being leveled.

Dan Williamson, spokesman for Coleman, said the mayor's "first-blush" reaction was that he doesn't like such walkways, which have fallen out of favor with urban planners. Walkways are common at convention hotels, though, as meeting planners put a premium on hotel rooms and meeting space being under one roof.

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The 10-story, \$140 million Hilton hotel across from the Greater Columbus Convention Center on N. High Street will have 532 rooms.