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Whitmer signs bills that pave way for expansion at Huntington Place

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Legislation signed into law by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer Thursday will allow for a future expansion of Huntington Place, the second time in 13 years that state lawmakers have paved the way for changes at Detroit's convention center.

The bills would allow the Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority, which oversees Huntington Place, to enter into public-private agreements, eliminate the authority's \$279 million spending cap, authorize \$299 million in bonding and redefine convention facility in the law about the authority to include plazas, green space, roads and bicycle paths.

The provision allowing for public-private agreements, in particular, would allow for a potential partnership between Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority and Sterling Group, owners of the former Joe Louis Arena site, to build one or two hotels next to the convention center, said Claude Molinari, chairman for the authority and president and CEO of the Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau.



The North American International Auto Show Charity Preview at Huntington Place in Detroit. *Daniel Mears, The Detroit News*

“What we're looking to do is put a project together that spurs private development, and we're going to invest dollars in infrastructure and preparation with the facility with potentially parking, potentially a ballroom or redesign of the loading dock, certainly connecting Second Street to the Detroit River, but it's also to have private developers spend their private dollars on building hotels,” Molinari told The Detroit News earlier this month. “That will attract more business to downtown.”

The goal would be to have at least one hotel with 750-800 rooms on the west side of Huntington Place, he said. But two hotels, he said, would be “sensational.”

In her bill signing announcement, Whitmer said the bills would help to advance economic development in the state by allowing for the authority to make additional bond issuances and capital expenditures to “accommodate more convention business and development in the area.”

“These bills will help us build on our economic momentum,” Whitmer said in a statement.

The authority was created under 2009 legislation, which transferred ownership and operation of Cobo Center, the former name of Huntington Place, from the city of Detroit in exchange for getting an infusion of state aid to pay for the renovation and expansion of the convention center to keep the North American International Auto Show.

The bills signed Thursday also would set aside about \$85 million in hotel and liquor tax revenue over the next 17 years for annual \$5 million contributions toward Detroit's QLine street car.

The 3.3-mile track has been receiving subsidies to offset the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and offer free rides since 2020.

The GOP-led Legislature approved the bills extending the subsidy and altering the fiscal rules governing the convention center authority during a Dec. 7-8 overnight session. The bills were sponsored by Traverse City Republican Sen. Wayne Schmidt.