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A DECADE OF CHANGE AT HUNTINGTON PLACE BEGAN WITH DETROIT LOSING OWNERSHIP

A regional authority has been in charge of the downtown convention center since 2009. It's already planning its second major renovation.



BY AARON MONDRY

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Detroit's flagship convention center is on a path to its biggest physical transformation since it opened in 1960.

Huntington Place — previously, Cobo Center — has changed significantly over the past 50 years, being renamed three times and undergoing major renovations at least twice. By far the most impactful change came in 2009 when the City of Detroit relinquished its control of the space.

It's a bit of history that set the stage for the plans currently underway to add at least one hotel and revamp the infrastructure around the 2.4 million-square-foot venue.

By 2009, the city was struggling to pay \$15 million in annual upkeep to keep event organizers happy. The small and outdated venue was in danger of losing Cobo's prized annual event, the North American International Auto Show. At that year's show, leaking water needed to be collected in buckets and there were birds flying through the show.

The state brokered an agreement to keep the convention center solvent, but it required the city to relinquish control. Detroit City Council voted down the first proposal at first. It wanted the city to have more representation on the authority, setting off a legal drama where Mayor Ken Cockrel Jr. vetoed the rejection and the council sued. The court sided with council, saying the mayor didn't have the authority to block the deal.

But the council ultimately relented. The state's agreement meant Detroit would lease Cobo to the Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority (DRCFA) for 30 years. In exchange, DRCFA paid the city a lump sum of \$20 million.

The authority relies on a board to make decisions. The governor, Detroit mayor, Oakland and Wayne county executives and chair of the Macomb County Board of Commissioners each appoint one member. The board meets in public and votes on matters related to the center's budget, development and contracting. All votes must be unanimous to pass. Day-to-day operations are handled by a national venue management company.

Current board chair Claude Molinari called the arrangement a successful example of regional cooperation.

"Thankfully, for the most part, it's worked out really well and we've been able to find consensus," Molinari said.

As for who pays for the convention center: Revenue primarily comes from hosting events and a state fund financed by statewide liquor taxes and regional hotel taxes.

Renovations are paid for with bonds raised by the authority, including a \$279 million renovation starting in 2010. Over the course of the five years it took to complete the project, the convention center's arena was converted to exhibition space with upgraded essential systems and a new atrium.

Over the years, Detroiters realized the name of the venue was as tired as its old design. Albert Cobo, the center's namesake, instituted racist housing and planning policies in Detroit during his mayorship from 1950 to 1957. In 2019, the DRCFA sold the center's naming rights to TCF Bank for \$33 million. It first became TCF Center, and after TCF merged with Huntington Bank, Huntington Place. The bank will hold naming rights until 2041.

Molinari, who is also the president and CEO of Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau, says changes instituted over the last decade-plus have turned around the ailing venue.

"The building itself has really turned around," Molinari said. "The reputation of the building, the status of the building and the performance has been tremendous."

More changes, possibly the biggest in the venue's history, are on the horizon. Michigan lawmakers passed a bill last year that allows the DRCFA to issue bonds up to \$299 million, enter partnerships with private developers and expand the boundaries of Huntington Place to include sidewalks and roads.

In January, the DRCFA signed a deal with developer Sterling Group to build a 600 to 800 room hotel attached to Huntington Place. The developer is currently building a 25-story apartment building on the site of the demolished Joe Louis Arena nearby.

Plans are also in the works to add a 30,000-square-foot ballroom and parking, expand Second Avenue to the river and potentially build a second hotel attached to the venue. All these projects could cost anywhere from \$300 million to \$500 million. Molinari said the authority is hoping to break ground in the first half of this year.

On top of all this potential development, ground broke last year on the Ralph C. Wilson Centennial Park on the west riverfront, mere blocks away from Huntington Place. Molinari is hopeful the entire area would become a major attraction for visitors who can stay at a hotel, go to a convention and enjoy park and restaurant amenities by foot.

"This project is going to completely open up that part of the city west of the center and hopefully be a big benefit not just to visitors, but everybody," Molinari said.