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Women execs lead Huntington Place as Detroit's convention season ramps up

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As the dust settles from the grips of this two-year pandemic, [Huntington Place](#) is gearing back up as it rolls out the welcome mat for upcoming convention business.

At the helm of the facility located in the heart of Detroit are three female executives: Karen Totaro, general manager of Huntington Place/ASM Global (the management company that runs it); Becky Bixby, assistant general manager of Huntington/ASM Global, and Lisa Canada, chair of the Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority (the five-person governing body of the center).



From left: Lisa Canada, Karen Totaro and Becky Bixby at Huntington Place in February 2022. *Provided By Huntington Place*

Women hold just 21% of all facility management positions in the country, according to 2021 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. But in the Motor City, women are leading the way as they run Huntington Place — ranked as the 17th largest facility in America with 723,000 square feet of exhibit space.

In addition to Canada, women also hold two of the four other Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority posts. The authority was created in 2009 by the Michigan Legislature, along with city of Detroit, and Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties, as each appoints a person to the board.

Inforum, an organization working to promote women in the workplace, has been keeping tabs on how women are faring in the corporate suite, on boards and at companies as it recently issued [its latest report](#).

I checked in with Terry Barclay, president and CEO of Inforum, to get her thoughts about Huntington Place and women holding the top three jobs: “Even in 2022, when women comprise nearly half of the overall workforce, female leadership teams are rare,” said Barclay. “Yet, data tells us that women in leadership spur greater innovation and will better manage risk, two factors that would benefit any sector.”

Totaro, a seasoned convention facility executive who held previous jobs in San Diego and Portland, Oregon, took over the Detroit job in April 2021 after Claude Molinari left to take over Visit Detroit (aka the Detroit Regional Convention and Visitors Bureau).

“Diversity and inclusion make for a better world and hence better business. Our voices at the table bring a different perspective,” said Totaro. “I recently read an article talking about why women entrepreneurs are better than men. It showed how female-owned firms generate higher revenues, create more jobs, showcase women as more effective leaders with a larger appetite for growth. We have been society's secret superpower all along. No more secrets, we are right here.”

Out of 35 managerial jobs at Huntington Place, 17 are held by women.

Canada, whose day job is working as political and legislative director for the Michigan Regional Council of Carpenter and Millwrights, had this to say about the increasing role of women at the convention center: “It’s exciting and

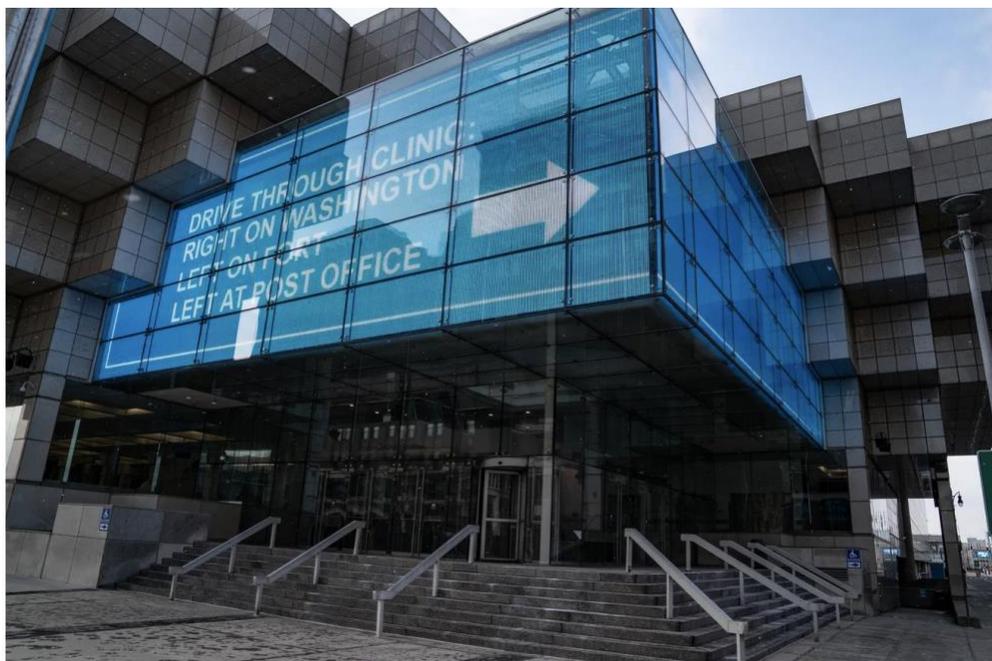
refreshing to see more women in a position of power. Women bring a wealth of leadership skills.”

Said Bixby, who runs the day-to-day operations: “Women create team environments that are inclusive and diverse. It’s within these types of environments that the best ideas organically transpire because they are encouraged and cultivated.”

There’s certainly lots of history tied to the facility. It’s located on the site where Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, a French colonist, landed on the banks of the Detroit River in 1701.

Built by the city of Detroit in 1960, Huntington Place has seen presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, Gerald R. Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush address a convention or attend an event there. Numerous events have been held in the facility, including the NAACP’s annual dinner — considered the largest sit-down dinner in America with over 10,000 people.

The Cobo name, given to the facility when it opened, was dropped in 2019 when TCF Bank purchased it in a naming rights deal. Huntington Bank took over TCF and the convention center was christened with Huntington Place as



The City of Detroit hosts COVID testing and vaccines Tuesday, Jan. 6, 2022 at the Huntington Place Atwood garage (former TCF Center). *Mandi Wright*

its new moniker on Dec. 9, 2021. The center is in the process of putting Huntington Place signage around the facility.

Heroic efforts have also taken place there the past two years that will also be part of its story and archives. It was the site where hospital CEOs and political leaders teamed up in the battle against COVID-19 as it was quickly recast as a temporary field hospital for COVID-19 patients. It also was the place where over 228,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine were distributed and COVID-19 tests given until that all ended last month.

And the docks on the west end of the center (docks are fully connected to exhibit halls) is where 6 million pounds of food were distributed to those in desperate need during the crisis. [Food Rescue US set up and distributed food](#) to local nonprofits that got it to people across southeast Michigan.

Thankfully, a healthier chapter is playing out as events are coming back.

“The fall will be strong. We are already seeing a robust spring and it looks to be continuing to reach pre-Covid numbers for some shows,” said Totaro. “International travel remains sluggish for major conventions. However, in its place we are seeing much stronger national, regional and corporate business.”

Two shows she mentioned coming up: [Automate](#), which is a gathering revolving around robots, robotic automation and technology, will be held in June. “Previously this show was in Chicago, and Detroit now has a multiyear deal,” she said.

And in August, “we will host [Connect](#), which is attended by over 4,000 meeting planners who make decisions as to where to host their events.”

Then there’s the granddaddy of all events in Michigan: The [North American International Auto Show](#) coming in September. The epic show has drawn hundreds of thousands each year and brings in over \$400 million to the region’s coffers, according to Visit Detroit.

“There is tremendous excitement for the return of this historic auto show,” she said. “As you can imagine with its highly anticipated return, planning is well underway. In addition, there will be city-wide activities taking place throughout downtown Detroit for the community.”

Things are looking up, too, in sporting events as Molinari and Mark Hollis, chair of the Detroit Sports Commission, which is part of Visit Detroit, recently announced the NFL will hold its 2024 Draft in Detroit, a process that took years to accomplish. The role of Huntington Place in the draft has not yet been determined but it is ready to participate.

“We are excited to see Detroit host the NFL Draft in 2024, and they are projecting \$200 million in economic impact for our region,” said Totaro. “We are always open to partnership and being a part of these major events for our city. For example, when Detroit hosted Super Bowl XL in 2006, the center hosted the NFL Experience.”

Then there’s the 2023 Chevrolet Grand Prix sponsored by Lear, which will find its way back on the streets of downtown Detroit next year, with the course running in front of Huntington Place.

“We’re always excited to see high-profile events coming to the city,” Totaro added.

Contact Carol Cain: 313-222-6732 or clcain@cbs.com. She is senior producer/host of “Michigan Matters,” which airs 8 a.m. Sundays on CBS 62. See Congresswoman Debbie Dingell, Rocky Raczkowski Frank Luntz and Bill Ballenger on this Sunday’s show, taped at Michigan State University’s Michigan Political Leadership Program event.