

Flowood conference center and hotel expected to be an economic boon to city and beyond

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The recently-completed resort style hotel and conference center in Flowood is expected to bring in visitors from across the state, and officials believe it will become a economic boon for the city and the surrounding area — possibly even Jackson.

The official unveiling of the Sheraton Flowood Refuge Hotel and Conference Center to the public will be on Friday.

"It's a resort — an urban resort," Tom Troxler, the executive director for Rankin County's economic development arm, Rankin First, said. "There's nothing like it in our area. I hope it brings new meetings, new conferences to allow people to not only experience Flowood, but downtown Jackson as well."

Behind the center

Located about a mile from the Jackson-Medgar Wiley Evers International Airport, the 54,000-square-foot center has an attached resort style hotel and a wide range of amenities.

The hotel sits on the 18-hole Refuge Golf Course, which itself has gotten a slew of upgrades, such as new and enlarged cart paths, a redesign of several holes and new turf on all the greens and a cart storage facility.

There's a rooftop bar where visitors can take in the Jackson skyline and fireworks from nearby Trustmark Park, home to the Mississippi Braves. The hotel also features a spa, a restaurant that serves American fare called Rebecca's, and a culinary school. Outside the hotel, visitors can enjoy a resort-style pool, lazy river and 15-acre lake with walking paths. The lawn adjacent to the lake is capable of accommodating weddings and other outdoor events.

Room rates start at about \$150 a night.

Center will benefit Flowood, Jackson

The Mississippi National Guard filled up the 200-room hotel and held a conference at the center earlier this month. The about 900 visitors stayed at the Sheraton and three other hotels in the city, also dining at area restaurants.



The Sheraton Flowood Refuge Hotel and Conference Center, seen on Wednesday, May 26, 2021 in Flowood, Miss., will be unveiled on Friday. The 54,000-square-foot center has an attached 200-room resort style hotel and a wide range of amenities. *Eric Shelton/Clarion Ledger*

It was a test and possible harbinger of what's to come, officials say.

"I've been through it a couple times," Flowood Mayor Gary Rhoads said Tuesday. "And from every review I've heard, it has gone pretty well. Everyone's excited for it to be open to the public."

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While some city of Jackson officials have argued that another would take away business from the already struggling convention center complex less than 10 miles away, Troxler said it is more likely the Flowood attraction will benefit the region.

"I believe this will bring new people in the Jackson metro area, whether they intend to visit the museums in downtown Jackson, go to a Mississippi Braves game at Trustmark Park or visit the outlet stores," Troxler said.

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The conference center is not to be confused with a larger convention center, Rhoads made clear, although both a conference center and convention center essentially have the same goal — to bring in visitors and their dollars to the area.

The conference center meeting space covers about 26,000 square feet compared to Jackson's 330,000 square feet. One exhibit hall at the Jackson facility, for example, has over twice the meeting space of the Flowood center. Compared to nearly 10,000 capacity in Jackson, Rhoads said the Flowood center can hold about 800.

That makes it an ideal spot for smaller gatherings from groups from across the state who are also looking for a bit of the resort experience, Rhoads said. The 34th annual Mississippi Wildlife Extravaganza will be held at the center later this summer.

The center will also likely be a springboard for future developments in the immediate area, Troxler has said, since it is expected to bring in a steady stream of visitors.



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Idea for center years in the making

Construction on the center began in 2017, but the genesis of the development dates back almost a decade, Rhoads said, when a private doctor first proposed the idea in 2013. The hotel and center were originally slated to open in the summer of 2020, but that was delayed by the coronavirus pandemic.

The city has invested about \$16 million into the about \$55-million investment, Rhoads said. The public/private partnership is with famed New Orleans developer Joe Jaeger, who has developed 20 hotels mostly in the New Orleans area, but also the Dunleith mansion in Natchez. The city of Flowood owns the conference center while Jaeger's company, MCC Real Estate, will operate and manage it concurrently with the hotel.

The city has a 3% hotel and motel tax which will help pay down its debt to finance its part of the investment. It comes on top of a 2% tax from the county. Flowood will also see annual lease payments from the hotel side of the property, Rhoads said.

The project has already been approved by the Mississippi Development Authority's tourism tax program, which provides a tax rebate for tourism-related projects in the state. Likewise, the Rankin County Board of Supervisors has offered a property tax incentive for the development and Rankin First has also committed funding from the county's hotel tax.

Center still hiring workers

Rhoads said while he is optimistic about the future of the center, it is experiencing the same issue many businesses are coming out of the coronavirus pandemic — a lack of workers. He said on Tuesday only 54 of the center's 120 positions have been filled.

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