

Convention center aims to double its capacity

Plans call for campus with new exhibit hall, hotel, ballroom, more

By Casey Ross
GLOBE STAFF

The **Boston Convention & Exhibition Center**, already the largest building of its kind in New England, would double in size under an expansion plan unveiled yesterday by state officials, eventually becoming a 1-million-square-foot tourism "campus" on the South Boston Waterfront.

The blueprint adds a 400,000-square-foot exhibit hall behind the main center, a 1,000-room hotel, a 5,000-seat auditorium, and a 65,000- to 75,000-square-foot ballroom elsewhere on the property.

The announcement kicks off a yearlong planning process in which a 25-member committee of public officials and business leaders will try to finalize the build-out. But already some major hurdles have emerged: The Massachusetts Convention Center Authority does not own much of the adjoining land on which it plans to build, nor have state officials determined how to pay for a project that could top \$1 billion.

One official acknowledged state and city leaders will have to examine whether to raise

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travel and tourism taxes and fees to finance construction.

Moreover, other cities across the country — Nashville, Oklahoma City, San Diego, and San Francisco — are also weighing major convention center expansions, prompting a prominent industry analyst to question whether Boston would be adding to a glut of meeting space.

"In a market that is already overbuilt, [Boston] is pouring in more space and more hotel rooms that are unlikely to yield much benefit," said Heywood Sanders, a University of Texas professor of public administration who tracks the convention market.

But local officials say the expansion is needed to vault Boston into the top five of meeting destinations in the nation, competing with the 1-million-square-foot-plus facilities in Chicago, Las Vegas, Atlanta, and New Orleans.

"Over the last year, Boston has lost the opportunity to host 72 future events that wanted to come here, because we lacked enough exhibit space, hotel rooms, and the ability to host more than one show simultaneously," said James Rooney, the convention center authority's executive director. That, he added, cost the region hundreds of millions of dollars in lost spending from conventioners.

The newly appointed committee will spend the next year reviewing the need for a bigger facility, consulting with neighbors and residential leaders about the placement of buildings, and then determining the final configuration. Its recommendation is due by the end of 2010.

After that, the Legislature would need to authorize additional borrowing to pay for any expansion. The whole process could take from five to 15 years, officials said yesterday.

The cost could be hefty. Sanders, the Texas professor, estimated the expansion would cost \$800 million to \$1 billion, not including the 1,000-room hotel.

Opened in 2004, the Boston convention center was financed by an increase in the hotel tax, and fees on taxis, rental cars, and tourist tours.

While its business has steadily increased since opening, on one measure the convention center hasn't lived up to a forecast Mas-

sachusetts officials made more than a decade ago. In 1997, a consultant estimated the center would generate 670,000 hotel room stays per year by 2009; figures released yesterday show that for the 12-month period that ended June 30, it generated only about 313,000 room stays.

Rooney said the lack of hotels in the immediate vicinity is part of the problem: Planners of big conventions won't come to Boston because there aren't enough hotel rooms nearby.

The 790-room Westin Hotel is attached to the center on the D Street side, while the 465-room Marriott Renaissance is several blocks away across Summer Street. A study released by state officials yesterday concluded that the Westin could expand by 330 rooms and that another 1,000- to 1,200-room hotel should be built next to the facility. The study found that the convention center also requires a 5,000-seat auditorium for presentations and special events, and a second ballroom would accommodate simultaneous conventions.

The study recommended a number of street-level improvements to make the area — a windswept block surrounded by highways and railroad tracks — more pedestrian-friendly.

The authority would need to acquire several parcels of land owned by the Massachusetts Port Authority, the Boston Redevelopment Authority, and the US Postal Service. Officials from Massport and the BRA attended the announcement yesterday, saying they were eager to cooperate because of the additional development in the area it could trigger.

"Mayor Menino and the BRA are excited to participate in this well-planned expansion of the BCEC's campus, an effort that will make it among the most competitive facilities in the nation," said BRA director John Palmieri.

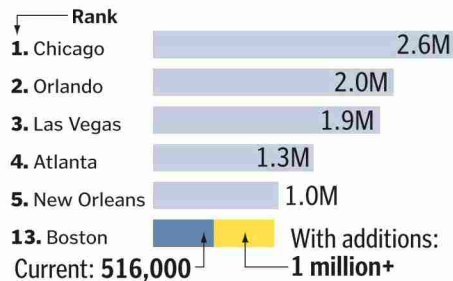
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ON THE WATERFRONT
 Read previous coverage of the redevelopment of South Boston's waterfront at www.boston.com/business.

SQUARE FEET OF EXHIBIT SPACE



SOURCE: Massachusetts Convention Center Authority
 JAMES ABUNDIS/GLOBE STAFF



SOURCE: BCEC Strategic Development Plan
 DAVID BUTLER/GLOBE STAFF