

Developer: Arts extravaganza to mark opening of The Main

By Nate Delesline III
nate.delesline@insidebiz.com
November 21, 2016



Contributed photo: Gold Key | PHR, Ashley Lester

The marquees of The Main hotel and conference center were illuminated for the first time on Nov. 19. The hotel is slated to open in the spring of 2017.



Contributed photo: Gold Key | PHR, Ashley Lester

The Hilton logo at The Main, a soon to open hotel and conference center in downtown Norfolk, was formally illuminated on Nov. 19, 2016.



Nate Delesline III

Bruce Thompson, CEO of Virginia Beach-based Gold Key | PHR Resorts & Hotels, discusses the amenities of one of the guest rooms at The Main, a hotel and conference center property that will open soon in Norfolk. The Elizabeth River and some of Norfolk and Portsmouth's skyline are seen through the window.



Nate Delesline III

The Main hotel and conference center in Norfolk, center, is now part of the city's skyline, along with the Marriott Norfolk Waterside hotel, right and the Dominion Enterprises building, left.



Nate Delesline III

Bruce Thompson, left, CEO of Gold Key | PHR Hotels & Resorts, points to a feature in his soon to open hotel, The Main. Virginia Sen. Frank Wagner, center, was among the recent guests to tour the property.



Nate Delesline III

Bruce Thompson, CEO of Virginia Beach-based Gold Key | PHR Resorts & Hotels, center, discusses one of the outdoor areas at The Main, a hotel and conference center property that will open soon in Norfolk.



Nate Delesline III

Bruce Thompson, CEO of Virginia Beach-based Gold Key | PHR Resorts & Hotels, pauses during a tour of an outdoor lounge area at The Main, a hotel and conference center property that will open soon in Norfolk. Behind him is Norfolk's World Trade Center building.

Developer Bruce Thompson plans to turn The Main hotel and conference center in downtown Norfolk into a beacon of arts and culture for a weekend before it opens to the general public.

During a recent tour of the property, Thompson told a tour group he is working with Rob Cross, executive director of the Virginia Arts Festival, to produce “the largest celebration of the arts ever in the commonwealth of Virginia.”

Thompson said he and Cross have been in touch with the Virginia Opera, the Virginia Stage Company, the Hurrah Players, The Governor's School for the Arts, the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, the NEON District, the Chrysler Museum – “just about everybody that's involved in the arts.”

All of those groups have been invited to perform or stage exhibitions, on a date to be determined. Revenue from ticket sales for the event will be re-invested with the goal to provide \$1 million for the Hampton Roads arts community.

His company, Virginia Beach-based Gold Key | PHR Hotels & Resorts, has staged similar charitable and arts-based opening events for other properties. Thompson said he wanted to do the same for The Main, which will be a Hilton-

branded property. It is slated to open on or about April 1.

“We believe that Norfolk is the cultural hub of Hampton Roads, and we thought that would be the way to ground Norfolk, to continue to reinforce the idea of Norfolk being the cultural hub,” said Thompson, who added that seeing all the moving pieces of The Main come together is overwhelming in a positive way.

“We knew all the individual pieces were going to be dramatic, but when you see it all together, like a tapestry put together, it’s overwhelming,” Thompson said while standing in the building’s glass-walled, ground-floor atrium. “It’s like ‘Wow. The sum of the parts are far greater than the whole.’”

Artists will have plenty of professional spaces to choose from. With a cost of about \$150 million, The Main is 482,858 square feet of total construction. The 21-story building has about 300 guest rooms and multiple dining options.

In addition to a private, executive meeting room, the hotel’s “junior ballroom,” as Thompson described it, can accommodate 700 for dinner. The room’s square shape – in contrast to the rectangular shape of many ballrooms – facilitates more setup flexibility. In addition, “everything in here – all the rigging points, all the screens, all the technology – everything is already built in.”

“This ceiling, and you’ll see it again in the main ballroom,” Thompson told the group, “is designed so that on a moment’s notice, “we can change lighting, we can hang stuff, we can do just about anything we can to create any type of environment.”

The Main’s main ballroom on the fourth level has the same high-tech specifications built in and can accommodate between 1,500 to 2,000 people, depending on how the room is configured.

The Main celebrated another landmark moment Nov. 19 – the building’s exterior signs were illuminated for the first time – just in time for Norfolk’s annual Grand Illumination holiday parade.

Those on the tour murmured in admiration at the waterfront and city skyline views seen through the guestrooms’ large picture windows that are intended to be a focal point for visitors. But the building, he added, is more than just a hotel.

“We believe (The Main) will give us the critical mass to create a true destination in downtown,” said Thompson, who added he’d like to see Granby Street, Town Point Park and Waterside tied together with a connection from Main Street to Waterside Drive near the U.S. Customhouse.

Although getting the Customhouse to possibly relocate its parking lot would

literally be a federal case, Thompson said it's a case worth pressing.

“We’ve got that big investment in Waterside and a big investment here, and we’ve separated it – the businesses on Granby Street, and commerce on Granby Street from commerce at Waterside and vice versa. This is all supposed to work together as downtown,” Thompson said.