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INSIDE BUSINESS QUARTERLY

Norfolk's Newest Star

by Ben Swenson
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Eric Lusher

The Hilton Norfolk Main, opening April 3, is a 21-story, three-restaurant, 300-room hotel and conference center that has been more than four years in the making. City officials and local businesspeople hope the project will be a shot in the arm for downtown Norfolk.



Rendering Provided by The Main

The Main offers three distinct dining options, including Saltine (rendering above) and Grain. Saltine will be an urban-chic seafood and cocktail spot on the first floor. Grain, on the fifth floor, will offer a wide supply of craft beers and some of the best views in downtown.



Rendering Provided by The Main



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A room adjacent to the main floor of a new downtown Norfolk eatery seems straight out of the Roaring '20s.

Patrons push back a wall of bookshelves to access a hidden, private dining room, crimson carpet contrasting with an arched ceiling of black subway tile. There's a distinct speakeasy vibe in the discreet space.

Yet alcohol consumption is not only encouraged here, it's assisted by full-time specialists who have deliberated at length about the drink lists.

This is one of the novel amenities that proponents hope will set The Main apart from any hotel and conference center that has yet been built in Hampton Roads. The Hilton Norfolk Main, which opens April 3, is a 21-story, three-restaurant, 300-room hotel and conference center that has been more than four years in the making. The brainchild of local developer Bruce Thompson, it is the latest prospect of a cadre of businesspeople and civic officials who hope the project will

be a shot in the arm for downtown Norfolk, which has been the target of several revitalization efforts, such as the new Waterside District along the Elizabeth River.

Thompson is no stranger to mammoth projects. He was born in Norfolk, grew up in Virginia Beach, and co-owned a successful charter travel business based in Hampton Roads before changing his focus to local real estate development. The firm he helped launch is now Gold Key | PHR Hotels & Resorts, which develops and manages hospitality properties in southeastern Virginia. Thompson is CEO. He has long been a favorite son of Virginia Beach, having built or redeveloped conspicuous real estate in the resort city, such as the Hilton Virginia Beach Oceanfront Hotel, and most recently, The Cavalier.

The City of Norfolk demonstrated confidence in Thompson when officials agreed The Main would be a public-private partnership. The total price tag for the project was about \$150 million, with the city footing more than \$100 million of that bill. At a luncheon and hard-hat tour hosted by Gold Key | PHR just weeks before the planned opening, former Norfolk Mayor Paul Fraim, instrumental in convincing Thompson to develop the property, seemed pleased. “This will be a venue that everyone will be proud of,” he said.

The center offers world-class amenities, including the largest grand ballroom in Virginia – 18,382 square feet, capable of holding 2,000 people. A smaller ballroom on the second floor can hold 500 more. There is enough capacity to host multiple conferences at once.

The meeting rooms for break-out sessions have been designed with tech-savvy, environmentally aware professionals in mind, including assets such as video conferencing and interactive screen displays. More than two-thirds of them are illuminated by natural light and offer sweeping views of iconic downtown landmarks, such as Battleship Wisconsin.

For meetings on sensitive subjects – national or corporate security, for instance – spaces with secure modes of communication offer the discretion sensitive material warrants. All the rooms on the periphery of the conference spaces have been named after brain chemicals, such as serotonin and adrenaline. But if the nuts and bolts of the conference workspace are meant to facilitate the business that occurs there, the hotel’s big picture is meant to awe guests, conference attendees and otherwise, with its grandeur. “The Main redefines an architectural standard,” Thompson said. “We incorporated details that will offer sensory overload.”

Designers included enough on-site parking to accommodate hotel guests, though the garage is hidden beneath lower-level meeting spaces, so as not to detract

from the building's outward features.

Inside, there are 33 different types of finishes, from ceramic tiles to wood veneer. The public spaces are richly decorated with visual art, such as a piece by the firm Whiting & Davis made from free-flowing chain mesh that towers behind the registration desk. The mesh sways with soft, ambient air currents, giving the impression of a hull shimmering as it moves along water, a nod to the local nautical ethos.

Standard guestrooms follow with this decorative motif, with modern furnishings offering an eclectic alternative to conventional hotel accoutrements. Patrons with the means for an even more refined experience can book a stay on the hotel's top floors, on the so-called executive level, or in the \$2,500-a-night Presidential Suite.

Art was such an important component of this project that the grand opening weekend was billed as "The Main Event: A Celebration for the Arts" and included a slate of visual and artistic exhibitions by notable performers.

Thompson said the The Main's design and unveiling underscores downtown Norfolk's standing as "the cultural hub of Hampton Roads." Existing as a cornerstone of the local community, in fact, will be integral to its success, he said. The Main includes three distinct dining options – the urban-chic seafood and cocktail spot Saltine; a sophisticated, upmarket Italian restaurant, wine studio and piano bar called Varia; and Grain, a rooftop beer garden meant to showcase the region's burgeoning craft beer industry.

These eateries are rich in extra details. Saltine has a fish butcher where locals can leave with fresh seafood to cook at home. Varia's diners are entertained by a musician playing a candy apple-red grand piano. And Grain offers about 80 taps, many of them flowing with beers from local breweries. The speakeasy-inspired space is one of five private dining rooms.

As an added touch, The Main employs a cicerone, a sommelier and a mixologist. Josh Seaburg, The Main's mixologist, is excited to debut novel drinks, such as the Emyrean Club cocktail, a Peruvian Pisco-based drink that presents the striking appearance of a black liquid topped by a white foam.

The Main's attention to craft beverages, said Seaburg, is "the logical next step in a market that's ready to establish itself as a beverage hotspot. The local scenes for beer, wine and cocktails have been growing drastically over the last few years."

One measure of The Main's success will be the number of new visitors it attracts

from out of town. But management and city officials are adamant that the economic activity generated by so large a project will spill not only into the city's coffers, but into the businesses community at large, too.

City officials estimate the new hotel will generate some \$2 million annually in tax revenue. "This project will put money into the general fund that will benefit everybody," Fraim said. What's more, the conference center will buoy nearby hospitality venues by "pushing (business to) other rooms downtown," he added.

That optimistic sentiment is shared by adjacent business owners. Kevin Rafferty, president of the Downtown Norfolk Civic League, said the hope is that The Main will be "a catalyst for further economic growth throughout Norfolk and Hampton Roads." The Main, he said, "represents a win-win that will generate incremental business in and around its ideal location," since people who visit often wander the town to see local attractions.

However, Old Dominion University economics professor Vinod Agarwal, part of the team of academics that organizes the school's Economic Forecasting Project, said a more measured approach is warranted.

"This could be a plus for the economy to the extent that this hotel will attract new business, but that remains to be seen," Agarwal said. "If this hotel takes business from other hotels, like Marriott and Sheraton, then it is simply going to be substituting new business for old business."

What's more, said Agarwal, the premium that patrons are paying to stay at The Main – which some estimates suggest could be \$30 to \$40 per room night more than similar rooms nearby – should not come at the expense of the number of room nights that are booked. If that's the case, The Main may not be the economic boon proponents are hoping for.

ODU Economic Forecasting Project's 2017 regional yearly forecast for Hampton Roads projects a 4.2 percent increase in local hotel room revenue this year, with several factors, such as more federal travel and low gas prices, offering reasons for that growth.

Good publicity has burnished Norfolk's image among potential visitors. *Travel + Leisure* magazine recently named Norfolk one of its "50 Best Places to Travel in 2017," including the city with the likes of Helsinki, Finland, and Jura, France.

The hope among backers is that The Main will offer conferences and hospitality, and the city will be able to piggyback on that success, using the improving economy and good press to its advantage, ultimately reinventing downtown Norfolk as a national destination.

Already, there are some indications that The Main is drawing travelers and conference attendees. According to management, the number of overnight hotel room bookings at the Main is 100,000, more than 80 percent by visitors who have never been to Norfolk before. Mike Woodhead, vice president of marketing for Gold Key I PHR, said that The Main could see occupancy levels around 75 percent this year.

Thompson is optimistic that The Main's success will be big news. "I believe that what we're doing here in the region is going to get national attention," he said. **Q**