

PENNSYLVANIA

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City opens expanded convention center

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Philadelphians celebrated the opening of the expanded Pennsylvania Convention Center yesterday with officials gushing over the \$786 million project that has nearly doubled the size of one of the region's key economic generators.

The building, which houses two exhibit halls, extends from 12th Street to Broad and from Race to Arch. There is now 2.3 million square feet of sellable space and 528,000 square feet of unbroken exhibit space.

"We are now prepared to compete and open up Philadelphia and the state of Pennsylvania to the world," said state Rep. Dwight Evans.

He said the new facility, with its lobby of granite and limestone reflecting the natural light streaming through a mostly glass exterior, means that Philadelphia can now claim its place as an international city.

Ahmeenah Young, president and chief executive officer of the Pennsylvania Convention Center Authority, gushed yesterday that the new Terrace Ballroom on the third level of the building "is the largest ballroom on the East Coast."

She noted that for the first time, the center will be able to host two conventions at once.

But as officials congratulated each other in the light-filled atrium of the building, which faces Broad Street, near Race, Mayor Nutter also pointed to a challenge for the city's convention and tourism business.

Convention and tourism officials say that with about 10,000 hotel rooms, Philadelphia is about 2,000 rooms short to provide lodging for a fully used center.

Nutter challenged the private sector to invest in building more hotels in the city. He particularly challenged black and Latino entrepreneurs to own and operate hotels in Center City.

James Hartling, a principal in Urban Partners, an economic-development-consulting firm that created the blueprint for the early development of the Avenue of the Arts on South Broad Street, said it is likely that the private sector will respond to the challenge and add more hotel space.

"It's more than a possibility," Hartling said. "I think there are already some proposals out there."