

BUSINESS

THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

GROWING ON THE GRAND



Worker Bill Shue looks up at a beam being placed. His hard hat bears stickers from the various places he has worked.



PRESS PHOTOS/ANNA MOORE BUTZNER

The steel and concrete ribs of the DeVos Place convention center are forming on the 10-acre on the east side of the Grand River south of Michigan Street NW.

Convention center emerges from foundation of details

By Jack Naudi
Press Assistant Business Editor

Back in the good old days — about 24 months ago — unloading the set pieces for the DeVos Hall presentation of "Beauty and the Beast" would have been a snap.

January's show required extra effort. For starters, the second hole on a makeshift golf course at the Grand Center had to be moved to make room.

Such is life near the midpoint of construction of the \$220 million DeVos Place convention center. In less than two years, the center will open, featuring more than 1 million square feet and an exhibit hall big enough to fit three football fields.

Until then, Grand Center manager Rich MacKeigan and his staff must coordinate the smallest details to keep the shows going on.

The biggest headaches? Construction has shut down loading docks and drastically limited semi-truck access to the building. Moving items through the building can be painstaking, with some internal routes cut off.

That's why organizers of the West Michigan Golf Show had to dig up a short pitch-and-putt course — complete with sod and dirt — earlier than expected.

"There definitely has been some impact" from the construction on existing operations, "no doubt about that," MacKeigan said.

But the impact has been fairly benign thanks to an extraordinary communications effort involving about 30 key individuals such as MacKeigan.

That core group keeps in touch with hundreds of others — from project architects to local businesses and ticket-holders of DeVos Hall concerts. Without those efforts, the project would grind to a halt.



Foreman Dick Cooney makes steel beams look like ribs of a whale.

Dick Cooney is a foreman from Appleton, Wis., who arrived about three weeks ago. He's in charge of making

Perhaps no communication is more critical than what occurs moment-by-moment in the construction zone.

Each day about 200 laborers, from concrete contractors to dump truck drivers and crane operators, scramble around the 10-acre site. Although most are from the area, some are imported.

Dick Cooney is a foreman from Appleton, Wis., who arrived about three weeks ago. He's in charge of making



Workers place steel reinforcement rods.

DeVos Place, by the numbers

6,000 tons of structural steel required, equal in weight to 48 Statues of Liberty.

34,000 cubic yards of concrete, or 4,000 truckloads.

87,500 tons of dirt hauled away in 1,750 double trucks.

\$50 million, cost of street reconstruction.

440 toilets are planned.

400 feet by 360 feet, exhibition hall dimensions, equal to three football fields side-by-side.

400 feet by 75 feet, Grand Gallery dimensions.

378 concrete caissons dug into the ground to anchor the building.

40,000 square feet, ballroom size, capable of seating 4,000 for dinner.

\$169.5 million, building cost.

CONVENTION

Roof will be on by December

CONTINUED FROM E1

steel I-beams into what look like the ribs of a giant whale.

A heavy whale at that. In all, the project will require 6,000 tons of structural steel.

Cooney represents Azco Inc., one of 50 major subcontractors on the project. He and his crew have swung multi-ton beams on projects throughout the country.

It's dangerous stuff, with workers risking being crushed to death.

"You gotta watch out," Cooney said as his crew moved a 20-foot-high, 3,000-pound beam over what will be the Grand Gallery, immediately north of DeVos Hall.

The project is moving into a key phase. In May, a new DeVos Hall lobby will be complete, featuring decorative terrazzo floors and exterior walls, along with large picture windows allowing the public to see inside.

According to the construction timetable, the walls and roof of the 160,000-square-foot exhibition hall will be finished by December, leaving only interior work. The hall is expected to open in late 2003 or early 2004.

Cooney doesn't get too wrapped up in such details.

DeVos Place is "not a whole lot different" from other construction sites, he said.

And what it is, is complex. On a typical day, the site has about 200 hard-hatted workers representing perhaps a dozen different construction trades.

Eventually, that number will rise to 400.

Keeping track of them all is the responsibility of Don Van Beek, construction superintendent.

Van Beek is a 32-year veteran of Erhardt Construction, an Ada Township company that has partnered with national contractor Hunt Construction Group of Indianapolis to build DeVos Place. The Erhardt-Hunt duo also combined to build the Van Andel Arena.

Van Beek has an easy smile and quick laugh, but the barrel-chested veteran clearly is in charge of the job site.

"It's called respect," said Van Beek as he surveyed the DeVos Hall lobby work.

It comes, he said, from years of experience. He has at least a basic

understanding of all the trade work on the site.

Every once in a while, Van Beek's smile can turn to frown, followed by sharp words.

"Yes, I can do that," Van Beek said, still smiling.

Unlike Cooney, Van Beek can sit back and admire the enormity and complexity of the project, the largest he's ever worked on.

"It's awesome. It's a once-in-a-lifetime shot," he said.

Van Beek answers to Bill Sewall, a Hunt employee who could be called the DeVos Place guru. As the construction manager, no one has more responsibility for the bottom line.

He's in charge of finding the subcontractors, of bidding out the work, and; most importantly, of keeping DeVos Place on budget.

Sewall has found steel from as far away as Mississippi, stone from Minnesota and subcontractors from Wisconsin.

Perhaps equally as impressive, despite a winter that saw near record snowfall, "We have never shut down completely. We had guys moving snow," Sewall said.

Sewall is another interloper. Once the project is over, he will return to his home in southern Indiana and move on to other projects for Hunt.

Until then, he has a pivotal communications role. He must stay in close contact with Van Beek and construction crews, and he also talks regularly with representatives of the public body that owns the building.

In a typical week, Sewall attends five to 10 meetings.

More meetings

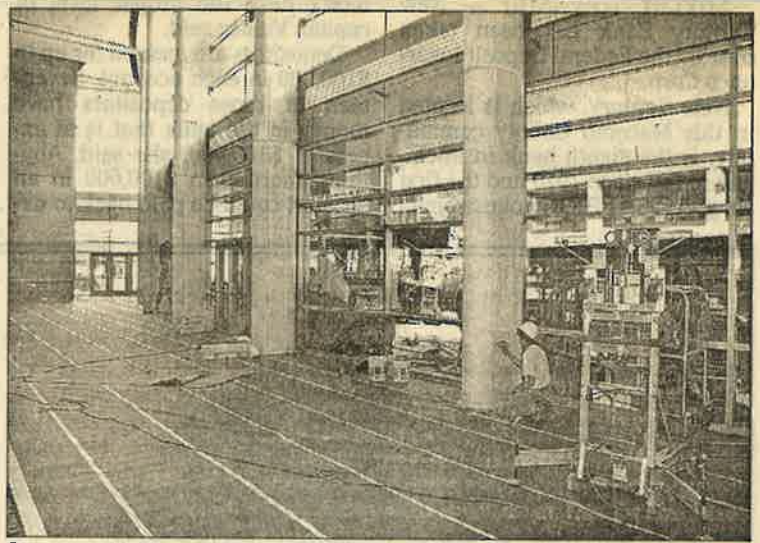
That's nothing compared to Dale Sommers, who represents the DeVos Place owners, the seven-person Grand Rapids-Kent County Convention/Arena Authority.

A former deputy Kent County administrator, Sommers was coaxed out of semi-retirement to guide the project from crude drawings to full completion.

After thinking hard, Sommers figures he attends about a dozen project-related meetings a week.

He's been breathing easier in recent weeks now that one of his biggest worries — the dreaded "voids" — is behind him.

Sommers and project engineers knew there were cavities just beneath the surface, carved out by the Grand River. The same



A renovated lobby in DeVos Hall is to open in April.

holes caused structural problems in the Grand Center that showed up as thick cracks in the walls and floor.

No one was sure how extensive the problem would be to the north, below the exhibition hall. Any voids would have to be filled with a concrete-like substance to preserve the building's structural integrity.

Construction crews found a veritable underground cavern. In August they began pouring the grout. And pouring and pouring.

About three weeks ago, they finished. Filling the voids took 2,500 cubic yards of grout — about 500 truckloads.

Despite that, the holes have not put the construction over budget or delayed it. In fact, the work is about two weeks ahead of schedule.

"To this point, it's gone very smoothly," Sommers said. "The coordination is a big factor. With Erhardt-Hunt, they've been through it before. They understand."

What they understand most of all is how to minimize the impact of the project on the surrounding area. The key has been limiting truck access to non-business hours as much as possible.

Concrete, for example, typically starts getting poured about 2 a.m. while most of the city is sleeping.

The steel beams are shipped to a staging area owned by a local trucking company. The company transports the beams to the site one-by-one, rather than stacking them up in flatbed trucks on busy city streets.

"It is working remarkably well," said Grand Rapids Mayor John Logie, who also chairs the convention-arena board.

Architects on guard

Bob Daverman is another one of those in the communications loop who has paid close attention to the construction work. The senior architect leads a team of 50 to 60 architects and engineers from his firm, Progressive AE, based in Plainfield Township.

DeVos Place is Progressive's largest project "by far, by

10-fold," Daverman said. And although the construction began more than a year ago, the architects and engineers have to remain on constant alert.

Relatively minor tweaks have been made throughout construction. Some are 11th-hour design improvements.

The Grand Gallery ceiling, for example, originally was supposed to be 100 percent skylight.

"Maybe that was a little bit of overkill," Daverman said. "We needed to design in acoustical controls."

So the glass was reduced 50 percent.

Other changes have been made to keep the project within budget.

A riverfront marquee was eliminated, for instance. And some of the exterior wall materials are less expensive than originally planned.

To Daverman, DeVos Place, especially the Grand Gallery with seventeen 34-ton exposed curved steel trusses, is "a structural tour de force. I think the urban neighborhood around it will really respond in a positive way."

Perhaps no public panel is closer to the project than the convention authority's building committee chaired by local businessman David Frey.

The panel oversees design changes, receives constant construction updates and is the first to address any glitches.

Although he is immersed in the details, Frey is most adept at communicating the bigger picture.

All of the steel, concrete, terrazzo, laborers, construction meetings and architectural changes add up to a building that he has championed for the better part of 20 years. DeVos Place, Frey tells anyone who will listen, will profoundly benefit the area for decades to come.

From his office across the street, Frey has a bird's-eye view of the future.

"One of the great things is cranes in the air," Frey said. "It is good news folks. There are a lot of cranes. It ought to get your juices flowing."



Bill Sewall, construction manager, finds subcontractors.



Don Van Beek, construction superintendent, keeps track of 200 hard-hatted workers.