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Glen hotel may spur year-round tourism

Watkins Glen Harbor Hotel expected to open this month to overnight guests.

By Jeff Murray
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WATKINS GLEN -- It's the most attention-catching feature on the Watkins Glen waterfront.

And starting this month, local officials hope the new Watkins Glen Harbor Hotel also becomes a dominant force in the Schuyler County economy.

If there's anything people are disappointed about so far, it's that the hotel didn't open sooner.

Otherwise, local tourism officials expect great things to happen once the \$14 million, 104-room hotel opens to overnight guests starting July 25, according to the hotel's Web site.

"I think it's going to be a huge impact. I think it's something we're very lucky to have," said Kelsey Jones, executive director of the Schuyler County Partnership for Economic Development, known as SCOPED. "If we can get 200 people for a few days in the middle of January for a convention, that's a big deal. People are going to spill out into the community and support our other businesses, whether it's January or July.

"There's the additional room tax and sales tax," Jones said. "It's a just a big help for us."

Developers broke ground in December 2006 for the four-story hotel, which stands on a 2.8-acre triangular-shaped parcel bounded by First, Franklin and Decatur streets near the Seneca Lake waterfront.

The facility features a ballroom, indoor pool, fitness center and 300-person conference facility.

Buffalo developers David Hart and Peter Krog are partners on the project.

Crews are putting the finishing touches on the hotel, which will open about two months later than originally planned, Hart said.

Still, the facility will open in time to tap into many of the events of the summer season, he said.

"We really wanted to be open ideally in May. We did our best. There were a few complexities," Hart said.

"The good thing is we've had the kitchen up and running a couple of weeks now," he said. "We've had a full staff, including a chef, so they've been working in there the last couple of weeks, practicing on menus. So they should be ready to take on a crowd based on that. So that's a good thing."

The hotel is fully staffed, Hart said. Its 75 employees exceed the original projection of 60. About 300 people turned out for two recruiting days a month ago, he said.

The original plan was for a limited-service hotel, but with some urging from Jones at SCOPED, the developers decided on a bigger facility that could host conferences and conventions.

That should make the Watkins Glen Harbor Hotel a year-round draw, Hart said.

That's something local businesses find encouraging, if it meets that potential.

"(The hotel) will help a lot. Watkins Glen does good in the summertime, but we do hardly anything in December," said Terry Aldrich, owner of Wildlife Art on Franklin Street. "The wineries will keep them busy through November. Come January through March, I've got my doubts anyone is going to come to Watkins Glen."

Eddie Peters, who owns the Village Variety Shop on Franklin Street, is also a little skeptical that the new hotel will boost business in the off-season. But he believes overall, it should benefit the local economy.

"It's anybody's guess. I don't see how it could hurt," Peters said. "We should get some money back into the local economy. If it doesn't, something is wrong."

Some businesses would have enjoyed seeing that impact a little bit sooner, but Jones said even though the hotel project is behind schedule, it will be more than worth it.

"Sometimes you've got to wait a little bit for good things. When people walk inside, they will understand," Jones said. "There's a lot of quality craftsmanship and fine details. It's been well worth the wait."

Hart agreed, saying he and Krog wanted to create something special in Watkins Glen, something that will be worth waiting a few extra months for.

"It's not your typical motel. This is an upscale facility that we created here," Hart said. "I think it's appropriate for the location and the village. I envision our hotel over time will gain the same reputation as the Sagamore at Lake George. We want this to be a four-diamond hotel rated by AAA. I think we'll get there."
