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## Conference Center Has Big Ideas

B.C. MANION

The Tampa Tribune

Mainsail Suites Hotel & Conference Center expects to begin construction this month on a conference center aimed at attracting large training conferences, weddings and special events.

The \$11 million center will have the latest in technology, 8,000 square feet of meeting space and a 6,000-square-foot patio, said Joe Brown, vice president for sales and marketing for Mainsail.

The patio will be next to the center's ballroom and will overlook a pond - with a spewing fountain designed to catch the eye of motorists passing by on Hillsborough Avenue.

The center, expected to be completed by September 2009, will replace tennis courts, an auto body shop, a warehouse and some vacant land on the south side of Hillsborough Avenue, just east of George Road.

Brown said it will provide conference, wedding and event planners a venue that is spacious enough to accommodate large groups near Tampa International Airport. "Presently, the largest group we can bring to this part of the county ... is 120 people, and that's limited by the size of our conference room," Brown said.

The facility will be able to accommodate about 350 for a conference and about 500 for a wedding or banquet.

One highlight is the outdoor space it offers, Brown said.

"The patio alone is 6,000 square feet. It's really going to offer all of our groups the opportunity to have food functions or receptions outside next to the meeting facility."

Brown thinks the conference center will be a big hit with conference planners because Mainsail has 360 hotel suite rooms in a campus-like setting.

People coming to the conference center will be able to walk to it from their rooms, which are housed in buildings that look like condominiums.

While the conference center is being built, the hotel also is engaged in a massive renovation on its 360 suites. The project, estimated at about \$4 million, is being done in phases and is expected to be finished by the spring of 2010.

Of the 360 rooms, 250 are two-bedroom suites and the rest are single-bedroom suites. Each bedroom has its own bath, and each suite has a living room, dining room and kitchen.

The updated suites will have laminate flooring, flat-screen televisions, new bedding and plantation-style shutters, instead of draperies. The availability of two-bedroom suites offers companies a chance

to save money by doubling up employees but preserving their privacy, Brown said.

That's especially important in today's tough economy, he said, noting that companies that are offering training want their employees to hit the sessions during the day and use the evening hours to study.

He thinks the size of the center, coupled with its aesthetics - an outdoor patio, an attractive fountain, lush landscaping and a picturesque gazebo - also will appeal to wedding planners. Families and other out-of-door guests will be able to fly into the airport, catch a Mainsail shuttle and walk to wedding festivities from their hotel rooms.

Mainsail is offering special rates for pre-construction reservations of space in the new conference center. Information on the discounts is available by calling (813) 243-2748.