

BOSTON HERALD

June 22, 2006

Westin hotel opening seen as Southie waterfront boost

BY JENNIFER HELDT POWELL

Actors dressed as birch trees swayed alongside real birch trees in the lobby of the city's newest hotel yesterday.

Clerks, waiters, housekeepers, and cooks lined the long lobby to greet the city's movers and shakers with applause as the Westin Boston Waterfront opened with great fanfare.

It seemed at times that the day would never come and now that it has, city officials say, it's just the beginning.

"It's the start of the blossoming of the waterfront," said Mayor Thomas Menino.

He said he would like to see more offices built alongside the hotels, condos, and restaurants that are moving in.

"We have an opportunity to do things on the waterfront that we haven't been able to do," Menino said. "We need to sell the waterfront."

The hotel, attached to the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center, is the largest to open in the city in 22 years.

It opened with 83 percent of its 793 rooms occupied, setting a record for the company's parent, Starwood.

Convention and city officials hope that the opening will prove to be a tipping point for South Boston development.

Even with the convention center up and running, developers have been slow to move into the area.

"I think you'll see some of the restaurants and retail appear, because that critical mass of people is starting to appear," said James Rooney, executive director of the convention center authority.

The Institute of Contemporary Art will open in the fall and a Marriott Renaissance hotel will open nearby next year.

The Children's Museum has also started an expansion and opened a new park this summer, which could bring more people to the area.

Starwood is also under contract to add up to 400 more Westin rooms within 10 years or when it hits a certain occupancy level. Rooney said he expects the expansion will come in less than four years.

"From a conventions perspective, we need to keep marketing, keep selling and keep bringing in business to continue the upward spiral of economic activity down here on the waterfront," Rooney said.