

Sprucing up a shuttered Sheraton

Millions spent
renovating 22-year-old
Maitland hotel.

BY BOB MERVINE | STAFF WRITER

MAITLAND — There's a whole new look at the Sheraton Orlando North.

While workmen scurry to put the finishing touches on paint and plaster, trainers are schooling the front office staff on the latest hotel software, and sales executives are busy touring potential meeting clients through the gleaming facility.

The 394-room hotel, at 600 N. Lake Destiny Road in Maitland Center, is finishing up a 10-month makeover. The hotel, which is expected to employ more than 200 people, will have rates in the \$109-\$229 range when it reopens Aug. 24.

Opened in 1984 as a Sheraton, the former owners filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. By late 2003, Sheraton pulled its affiliation because it no longer met corporate standards. In July last year, the hotel closed.

The new owners — Philadelphia-based AMC Delancey Group Inc. and Fairfield, N.J.-based Paramount Hotel Group LLC — negotiated the renewal of the Sheraton brand from Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide Inc., on the basis of a promised multimillion-dollar fix-up.

That started late last year when workers gutted the 22-year-old property, says General Manager Pete Valenzuela.



Valenzuela

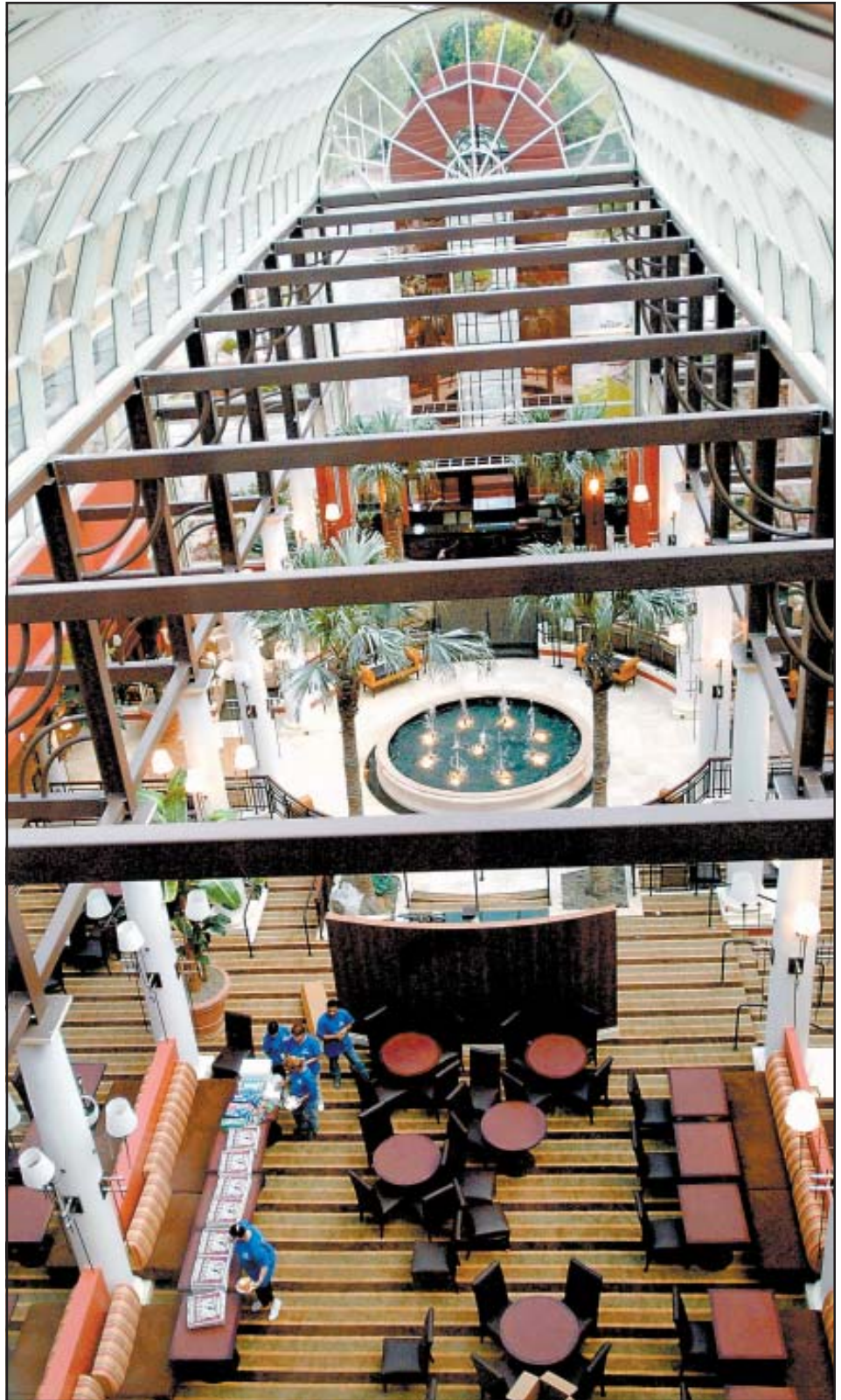


PHOTO BY JIM CARCHIDI

A view of the atrium lobby from the sixth floor of the Sheraton Orlando North

SHERATON: Hotel renovations include a lobby with Yahoo stations, Starbucks Shop



PHOTO BY JIM CARCHIDI

The newly renovated pool features water fountains and sprinkler effects around the perimeter.

They eliminated the hotel's tennis courts and redid every guest room — from new balcony railings to sleek flat-paneled LCD televisions — in cream and red with dark wood accents. There's a computer port at every desk workstation. The lobby also was overhauled, meeting space glitzed up and a new luxury swimming pool with waterfall features added.

Extensive renovations

Valenzuela won't put a price tag on the face-lift, noting that labor and construction material costs and a six-week delay on completion created some cost overruns.

"We had to remove and re-install guest room walls, put on a new roof and install a new air-conditioning system," he says.

The redesign has removed what was always a torturous, twisting flow from lobby to restaurant to guest room. The main entrance has no front desk, as such. A series of staffed pods and kiosks give guests the option of simply checking themselves in or seeking assistance.

The entire hotel offers a free wireless Internet connection. In addition to six computer stations in the business center, there are Yahoo stations in the lobby lounge as well.

From the check-in area, the building



Blackwelder

opens into a spacious six-story, glass-domed atrium. Shades of dark red and brown are balanced by creams and black-and-white accents and a marble floor with patterned inlaid carpeting. A centerpiece fountain and a half-dozen live palm trees add a note of serenity, while colorful bromeliads and orchids encircle the space.

In the atrium are the lobby bar, the 150-seat Grande Cafe, an all-day restaurant that includes a buffet breakfast on a marble display — overlooked by a hostess stand for seating. Just off the lobby is a 20-seat Starbucks Shop — the full-service version that includes snacks.

Restaurant spot still vacant

As for the hotel's still-empty signature restaurant, Valenzuela says he's reviewed and turned down four proposals from operators.

"I've promised if I don't get the right company in there by the end of the year, we're going to do it ourselves," he says, noting the company will purchase a national restaurant franchise, as it did with Starbucks.

Sheraton Orlando North



Owners: Philadelphia-based AMC Delancey Group Inc. and Fairfield, N.J.-based Paramount Hotel Group LLC

Hotel flag: Sheraton Hotels, part of Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide Inc.

Purchased: July 2005 for \$12.2 million

Contact: (407) 660-9000, www.sheratonnorthorlando.com

Anita Blackwelder, the hotel's director of sales and marketing, and her team are hosting teams of local VIP visitors and meeting planners on a series of guided tours, lunches and even just a casual "drop-by" program.

"It's our way of introducing ourselves, again, to a lot of loyal local customers," she says. "We want them to see just what we've done to the hotel."

The 15,000 square feet of meeting space, all named for stellar constellations, includes the 7,500-square-foot Grand Galaxy ballroom that divides into as many as four smaller spaces. The Hercules Room, a high-tech, tiered classroom, seats 50 and includes a smart board.

Nearly two dozen hotels make up the north Orlando submarket, most of them lining Interstate 4 between Orlando and Sanford. The new Sheraton is expected to go head-to-head with the other properties for both event and overnight business.

Scott Smith, an instructor at the Rosen College of Hospitality Management, worked at several of the hotels in north Orlando, including the Sheraton. He says competitive hotels have been grooming their customer relationships for the last year, knowing the new property would provide strong competition.

"Their location is a big advantage," he says. "We call it proximity marketing, and it means you own nearly all of the business around you. They have a significant advantage."

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