

Conference Center in Va. Tries to Cast A Wider Net

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For the past 33 years, one of [Northern Virginia](#)'s largest corporate training facilities has been a bit of a secret. The campus is tucked away up a winding road, hidden by dense woods in [Loudoun County](#). Guests stay in the center's 917 rooms, attend classes in its 250 meeting rooms and hang out at the in-house restaurant, [Starbucks](#) and sports bar. A guarded gate blocks unwanted visitors.

It's the ideal secluded retreat for the [Washington Redskins](#), federal agencies and other groups that have been among its prominent customers. But now the [National Conference Center](#) in [Lansdowne](#) wants to be more public.

This month the center opened a \$12 million ballroom in hopes of winning more local business. Boasting that it now operates the largest ballroom in Northern Virginia -- 16,500 square feet for 1,800 guests -- the center aims to increase its visibility in the region's event circuit to attract weddings, fundraising galas and trade shows.

"We're announcing we're here," said Eric Whitson, the center's director of sales and marketing. "People who live a mile from us don't know who we are or why we're here."

In terms of size, the new facility has plenty of competition in the region. There are giant halls such as the [Washington Convention Center](#) and the soon-to-open Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center, and accommodations at such places as the [Marriott Wardman Park Hotel](#) in Northwest Washington, with 173,000 square feet of meeting space, including a 30,264-square-foot ballroom. The Crystal Gateway Marriott in [Arlington](#) has a 16,000-square-foot ballroom, and the Bethesda North Marriott Hotel & Conference Center's ballroom is 23,500 square feet. Many other venues specialize in hosting smaller events.

The National Conference Center is trying to boost occupancy rates. Because most corporate training takes place during the week, management hopes the ballroom will draw guests for holidays and weekends. On average, the facility is only about half full.

Kurt Krause, the center's general manager, said he expects the ballroom to generate \$1 million in catering revenue and 15,000 additional room bookings this year.

The conference center is nestled in Lansdowne, a planned community near [Leesburg](#), overlooking the [Potomac River](#). The facility has gone through a number of changes over the years.

Formerly the Xerox Document University, the conference center was built in 1974 for [Xerox](#) employees to be trained with the latest copier equipment and technology.

In 1994, Xerox began to market its professional training facilities to corporate executives and military officers whose employers paid about \$100 a day to have them learn business techniques or military strategy. Though it was heavily subsidized by the parent company, the conference center sought to become self-sufficient by drawing more outside clients. About 14,000 students attended classes on the campus each year.

Xerox decided to get out of the hospitality business and sold the property to [Oxford Capital](#) Partners, which launched the National Conference Center in 2000.

Since then, [Oxford](#) has spent \$70 million to revamp the campus's university setting with improvements such as creating executive suites and ripping out the shared dormitory-style bathrooms.

In the past six years it has doubled its annual revenue to \$40 million, Whitson said.

Today the center's 300 employees cater to large groups like [PricewaterhouseCoopers](#), [Lockheed Martin](#) and the [Small Business Administration](#).

Deltek, a Herndon software firm, completed its week-long annual sales kickoff last week for 230 people. Usually the firm holds meetings at the nearby Lansdowne Resort or Westfields Marriott in [Chantilly](#).

"We heard about this place by word of mouth," said Stefanie Fox, Deltek's director of events. "It's a lot more inexpensive and we get same things accomplished for a tighter budget."

This year Oxford Capital plans to spend \$4 million installing [iPod](#) docks and flat-screen televisions in every room.

But some things never change. The center retains a collegiate feel. Sparse bedrooms open up to common areas with Ping-Pong and pool tables, and couches. The hotel's wings are coded by bright primary-color walls.

And the buildings continue to be quite confusing to navigate. Legend has it that Xerox built the maze-like floor plan to encourage team building: Lost employees had to band together to navigate their way back to their rooms.

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