

Billings landmark hotel displays remodeling results

By ZACH BENOIT Of The Gazette Staff

The newly remodeled Crowne Plaza Hotel showed off more than \$10 million in renovations at its official grand opening Tuesday night.

New additions to the Crowne Plaza include a redesigned lobby, a street-level lobby bar called Montana's and a Starbucks coffee shop. A 16,000-square-foot conference center - taking up much of the hotel's second floor - has been added and includes several board and multifunctional rooms.

A new fitness center was built, and numerous improvements to electrical, mechanical and plumbing systems were made.

Nine guest rooms have been added, bringing the total to 289. Extensive upgrades to the rooms include flat-screen televisions, custom-made furniture and new carpet.

"We want this to be the preferred hotel in all of Montana," Douglas Dreher said. Dreher is the president of The Hotel Group, which bought the old Sheraton Hotel in the fall of 2006. "We have the responsibility of being the best."

Remodeling on the downtown Billings hotel began in January 2007 after The Hotel Group's purchase. The hotel has remained open since remodeling began, but Tuesday was the first time many of the additions and changes have been presented.

"Between the location and renovation, it's going to be a major player downtown," general manager Chris Johnson said.

Despite the festivities on Tuesday, work on the hotel is not finished. Crews are still working to finish a new restaurant, Montana Sky, on the 20th floor and finish the 23rd floor. Landscaping, exterior improvements and parking lot work will begin early this summer as the weather improves.

With more than 2 million bricks making up the Crowne Plaza, not a lot of changes will be made to the exterior, Johnson said. Instead, it will be cleaned up and the work will focus more on landscaping.

Lara Latture, vice president of The Hotel Group, said the remodeling is more than 90 percent done and hotel guests can most likely expect a finished product by midsummer.

Hardy Construction, of Billings, was brought in to help with the renovations in early March after a series of delays put the May 13 celebration in jeopardy. The Hardy crew came in to work on the lobby, the 17th floor and the 20th floor.

"It came along gradually and then suddenly," Dreher said of the efforts to remodel the hotel.

Now - and when the remodeling is finished - guests can expect a new level of hospitality and service at the Crowne Plaza, Latture said.

"This is a first-class facility with top-class service," she said. "It's not the same space it was before. We hope the community and the city is as excited as we are."