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CONSTRUCTION ZONE

Hotel responds to competition

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

They hadn't earned the renown of the ducks at the Peabody hotel in Memphis, but for years, half a dozen of the waterfowl greeted guests at the Embassy Suites in Westerville.

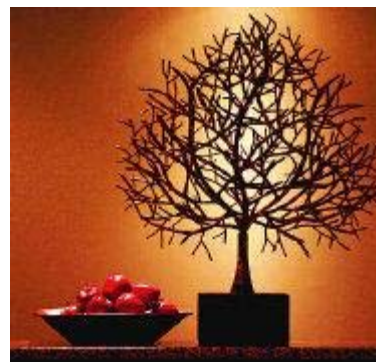
Alas, the stragglers have been sent on to greener pastures, or in this case, the greener waters of a zoo in Illinois. The koi and turtles that populated the hotel's indoor stream were sent packing, too, part of a \$6.5 million renovation of the 24-year-old property.

The changes were made by the Hotel Group, a suburban Seattle company that bought the Embassy Suites in spring 2006. The indoor stream is gone, replaced in part by a decorative fountain and new furniture that gives the hotel's lobby and atrium a fresh appearance.

"We wanted to modernize and make it easier for guests to get from the lobby to the ballroom," said Molly Curnutte, director of sales. "With the streams and everything, we didn't have a lot of seating, either. It's much more modern-looking now."

The expected opening this summer of the Polaris Hilton, a \$54 million project, has prompted several other hotels on the north side of Columbus to spruce up their properties, too. Several hotels in the Crosswoods area were upgraded, and some are even flying new flags. Hyatt Place and Doubletree are new brand names in that area. In the past two years, a Courtyard by Marriott and a Homewood Suites have been renovated.

"They're all going to be competing for that same group business," said Eric Belfrage, vice president for CB Richard Ellis Hotel Group. "That's what a healthy market does. They've got to keep remodeling to stay fresh and clean, and give people what they want."



Left: The new front desk offers apples to guests.



Below: The renovated workout room has more space and better equipment.

Some of that group trade comes from the nearby companies at Corporate Exchange, which includes several office buildings. Occupancy at Corporate Exchange has taken a couple of significant hits recently with the defection of Lifestyle Communities to the Arena District and Thomas W. Ruff to Grandview Heights.

Wayne Harer, a broker with Continental Realty, Cushman & Wakefield Alliance, said he's hopeful that the buildings will recover soon. "We have a lot of activity up there, so things are leasing when we get vacancies," Harer said. "We seem to fill them up right away."

That would be welcome news for Hotel Group, which owns or manages more than 30 hotels nationwide. Its only other property in Ohio is a Holiday Inn Select in downtown Cleveland.

Hotel Group renovated the lobby and atrium of the Embassy Suites from the ground up, first removing the stream, then installing new tile. The lobby and atrium also got new furniture and seating for the hotel's complimentary breakfast buffet in addition to installation of the fountain. There's a new, open-air admission desk in the lobby.

Embassy Suites also changed its restaurants, converting the main dining room into banquet space that can accommodate 100 people.

The former sports bar has been renamed Atrium Grille, and a new entrance has been added from the lobby. Its menu was upgraded, and the setting now serves as the main restaurant.

The event space is completed by a ballroom that can hold 250 people. The hotel's business center was expanded, and there's also wireless Internet access downstairs and in the guest rooms.

Hotel Group also upgraded the workout room, which has more space and better equipment, said General Manager Brian Latture.

The guest rooms are receiving substantial upgrades, although they're not being gutted. Beds, televisions, mirrors and lights are new.

"We're renovating to keep up with the market," Latture said. "We're not reacting to one or two specific properties but competition in general."

The hotel does, however, have a shuttle service that goes to the airport and surrounding areas, such as Easton. Easton-area hotels typically don't offer shuttles to Westerville.



JEFF HINCKLEY/DISPATCH PHOTOS

The lobby and atrium of the Embassy Suites in Westerville have been renovated from the ground up.



Latture said the hotel's goal is to keep occupancy in the 70 percent range. The final 2007 occupancy by the Embassy Suites was 66.8 percent.

Installation of flat-screen televisions in guest rooms is one improvement Latture said his group thought had to be made. High-definition TV service will be offered through LodgeNet Interactive Corp.

"We feel to be profitable, we've got to figure out the best way to take care of our guests," he said. "A lot of companies renovate a little at a time. Our idea from the get-go was to come in and do a full renovation."

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