

# The State

OPINION

## On its 20th anniversary, Columbia convention center a source of revenue and pride | Opinion

BY BOB COBLE  
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The exterior of the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center is shown in this file photo. TRACY GLANTZ [tglantz@thestate.com](mailto:tglantz@thestate.com)

The Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center opened 20 years ago in September 2004. It has been a successful regional project because it included not only the Convention Center but also the University of South Carolina's Colonial Life Arena, the Columbia Hilton Hotel and a new city parking garage.

The \$37.4 million, 142,500 square-foot center has been a significant economic engine for the entire Midlands region, bringing in tourists and visitors as well as conventions. It has generated millions of dollars in economic impact, from booked hotel rooms and restaurant meals to jobs. It can do even more.

A partnership between the city of Columbia, Richland and Lexington counties, Richland School District One, USC, the state of South Carolina and the South Carolina Department of Transportation, this project has played an important role in both revitalizing Columbia's downtown and being a catalyst for the University of South Carolina's westward expansion across Assembly Street. Like other great regional partnerships such as the Riverbanks Zoo and Garden, the Columbia Metropolitan Airport and the River Alliance, the Convention Center has had a tremendous and lasting impact in advancing our community.

As successful and as great a source of pride as the Convention Center is today, it did not get built without significant controversy, years of failed efforts and competing proposals. One would have built it over the Congaree River.

While building a convention center took persistence and faith in our community, we eventually acquired the old SMI Owen Steel Company site where the Convention Center and the Colonial Life Arena now sit, and all the governments worked together for a funding plan that included the Convention Center being built with tourism development fees and the land being acquired with tax increment funding.

For the groundbreaking in 2002, The State wrote that, "the ceremony marked the symbolic end of years of regional divisiveness over the convention center." Business owner Bill Dukes, who was tasked with leading the effort to build the Convention Center from the private sector, said, "Today this project does not represent a river that divides, but a river that has been bridged. Let this project always represent the potential our regional community has if everyone works together in harmony."

Twenty years later, few people from the area have not been in the Convention Center, admired the beauty of the building and terrace, enjoyed the wonderful art work by South Carolina artists such as Jonathan Green, seen the amazing history of the Midlands in the photographs along the walls, or remembered the places and people of accomplishment in the Richland One Hall of Fame.

The Lincoln Street connection from the Colonial Life Arena, the Convention Center to the Vista, is a major thoroughfare for residents and visitors alike to enjoy conferences, sports events, concerts, graduations and restaurants. The arena, the Convention Center and the resulting hotels helped us host the first two rounds of March Madness in 2019, and Mayor Daniel Rickenmann recently met with the NCAA in Indianapolis, along with Convention Center CEO Bill Ellen, to support March Madness coming back to Columbia.

These types of events have a tremendous economic impact on our entire region.

The Convention Center has operated these last 20 years with no taxpayer money but rather is paid for by hotel fees on visiting guests to the Midlands, just like every other city imposes on our citizens when they travel. As the mayor of Columbia when the project was built and now as an attorney for the Midlands Authority for Conventions, Sports and Tourism, I know I am biased, but the economic impact and success of the Convention Center is clear and compelling.

We must continue our success with additional meeting space and convention center hotel rooms to attract the larger conventions. The regional partnerships and plans will, of course, change, but the next 20 years can be just as successful as the last 20. Coble was mayor of Columbia from 1990 to 2010.

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