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## One month from today ... Opening night

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SOUTH COBB - Officials at the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre are busy with finishing touches, and as ticket sales begin and time wanes toward next month's opening night, excitement is mounting.

"It's kind of like the crescendo, you know, the build-up," said Michele Swann, general manager and CEO of the Cobb-Marietta Coliseum and Exhibit Hall Authority.

The \$145 million center is part of the Cobb Galleria Complex, which the authority governs.

Ms. Swann noted the surprisingly smooth process to open the venue that so many people have committed themselves to since 2002.

"We have had the good fortune of coming in ahead of schedule," she said of the highly anticipated Sept. 15 opening-night celebration, two months sooner than planned.

The center's upscale features - including the 2,750-seat John A. Williams Theatre, where the stage is only 160 feet from the farthest patron, and the elegant 10,000-square-foot ballroom lit by Murano chandeliers imported from Venice, Italy - have helped the venue develop an increasingly decorated inaugural calendar for public shows and private events.

And though not yet full-fledged, center officials plan to phase-in a system popular in New York and abroad to enable theatergoers to preorder and pay for a drink that will be ready for pick up during intermission.

Opening night features Broadway stars Michael Feinstein and Linda Eder performing their "Two for the Road" show, preceded by a black-tie gala to benefit the nonprofit Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre Foundation. Tickets for the show went on sale Saturday for \$75.

The Atlanta Opera, the center's resident company, has four shows lined up for the inaugural season; Turandot will show in September and October, Hansel and Gretel in November, Cold Sassy Tree in February and The Marriage of Figaro in April and May.

"They've never had a place that is ideal for their art form, and now they do," center Managing Director Michael Taormina said of the opera.

In March, the center will open its doors to an Atlanta Ballet performance and its first Broadway musical, Jesus Christ Superstar.

Taormina noted that due to a long-term association with the Fox Theatre, most Broadway shows new to Atlanta will go there, but said the center would have the chance to book "season extras" like Jesus Christ Superstar.

The relationship between his venue and the Fox, he said, is complementary, not competitive.

"I was very pleased to open our premiere year with at least one major Broadway show," Taormina said. "We hope to increase that in seasons to come."

Earl Smith, chairman of the Cobb-Marietta Coliseum and Exhibit Hall Authority, echoed Taormina.

"It'll take us a while to get everything in the pipeline," he said.

Smith noted Broadway bookings must be done far in advance, something the new-fangled center that broke ground in 2005 couldn't work on until recently.

And while a new venue might excite Broadway companies, it's an industry that likes comfort and often has to experience a venue before giving its stamp of approval.

"Once we've had attention paid to us, that will change," Smith said, noting the center already has been successfully reaching out. "People will want to perform there."

And according to Smith, another instance in which the center is ahead of schedule is in fostering economic growth in the surrounding area.

"I would think we're probably three years ahead of what we expected," he said, citing an \$80 million upgrade at nearby Cumberland Mall that started in mid-2005 and more mixed-use projects to come.

Smith said he wouldn't be so brave as to say the performing arts center would make a profit in its first year, but said he's "confident we'll make or exceed revenue expectations for this year."

"We've been able to stick to good business practices, and we've demonstrated that with the (Cobb Galleria Center)," he said, noting it would have been normal for the convention center to be in the red for its first two to three years, but it never was.

Fundraising success has been key for what many call Cobb's new crown jewel.

Smith was an advocate of ARTSBRIDGE, a metro-Atlanta education program through which the performing arts center will launch educational fieldtrips, in-school opportunities, collaborate with other arts organizations, and subsidize low-income schools and students and high school recognition.

Smith said he supports the project because one, "it's the right thing to do," and two, the center always will have a need for endowment funding.

"Some corporations and some foundations, you cannot approach or they will not consider if it's arts only," he said, noting that when education enters the agenda, it's an added appeal for potential contributors.

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