

## ***Mason Inn Conference Center is both Classroom and Catalyst***

*Impetus for the Inn was to aid GMU's growth as a 'major player in international research and development*

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by Janet Rems | Special to the Times

On a recent steamy June morning, Tim Loughman, general manager of the new Mason Inn Conference Center and Hotel on the Fairfax campus of George Mason University, could be found on his hands and knees, shirt sleeves rolled up, testing out cleaning fluids on the lobby's Italian porcelain tile floors.

"I'm a fussbucket about details," admitted Loughman, who works for Aramark Conference Centers, which manages and operates the inn for the university.

Aramark, an international company, also manages The National Conference Center at Lansdowne, outside of Leesburg, and the Georgetown University Hotel & Conference Center in Washington, D.C.

"That's what it's about, attention to details, service; that's what makes the experience exceptional. ... When people come to this area, we want them to think about the Mason Inn first," said Vicki Galindo, director of sales and marketing for Aramark at the inn.



Although it does not open officially until July 22, the 179,000-square-foot inn, on the south side of the campus, has been a hive of intense public activity for weeks.

Tours of the new facility for GMU faculty and other staff, students and alumni and assorted members of the public, including local politicians, come through about six times per day. It's already becoming a "hot spot" for politicians, Galindo said.

Lt. Gov. Bill Bolling had an event there at the end of June, and Gov. Bob McDonnell (R) also has one scheduled. U.S. Rep. Gerald Connolly (D-Dist. 11) recently was seen checking out the facilities, and a retreat for Virginia state senators in 2011 is being planned.

Sixteen weddings already are booked, the first scheduled for July 17. An Aug. 7 wedding reception was booked when the Inn was just beams. The parents of the bride, both GMU alums, took "a leap of faith," Galindo said.

And GMU's Alumni Association will have its second annual weekend at the inn Oct. 1 through 3, touting on its website: "You won't want to miss the opportunity to be one of the first alumni to stay in the NEW Mason Inn Conference Center and Hotel."

While already becoming a popular destination for weddings and other social and business events, the original impetus for building the Inn was to accommodate GMU's growth as a "major player" in international research and development, said Christine LaPaille, vice president for University Relations.

The inn, which took about five years between inception and opening its doors, was a "vision of President [Alan] Merten for quite some time," LaPaille noted. As more and more research funding was acquired -- already approaching \$100 million of the projected five-year, \$150 million goal -- and visiting researchers and collaborators from all around the world started flocking to the university, the need for such a state-of-the-art facility became increasingly obvious.

Developed by Concord Eastridge, a national real estate development firm, in partnership with George Mason University and designed by Genseler, one of the world's largest architecture firms, it was built with revenue bonds backed up by the state but no taxpayer dollars.

The inn, LaPaille said, will provide world-class conference and hotel space for leaders in the diverse fields the university is becoming known. These

include: global climate change, geospatial analysis, cyber infosystems and international security, sustainability, energy, environment, transportation, the science of aging and high-level neuroscience.

Two of the researchers leading clinical trials on breast and colorectal cancers are GMU professors, she pointed out.

"Our campus is well-positioned to be a catalyst to bring major conferences to this region ... to move aggressively into that market," La Paille said.

The inn also will serve as an extension of GMU's School of Management, especially its executive management MBA program, and its 2-year-old School of Recreation, Health and Tourism, which offers courses at both GMU's Fairfax and Prince William campuses.

Because of these partnerships, the inn has set up four fully equipped offices for this use. These offices also will be available to other deans when their departments host programs there. Plans include offering a variety of employment opportunities to management and RHT students, too.

Sixty-five percent of the inn's business is expected to come from the university "in some shape or form," Galindo said. The remainder is coming from the external market, including government and the many large corporations in the surrounding area.

"Affiliation with the university definitely opens doors for us," Galindo said.

The 148-room inn, which is a silver-level Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certified, green building, includes a presidential suite; a 175-seat restaurant, "Boxwoods," with a private presidential dining room; bar/lounge; flexible ballroom space; and 11 technologically cutting-edge meeting rooms, equipped with ergonomic leather chairs.

Expecting the inn to be a popular conference site for the region's many government contractors with homeland security ties, it also offers a windowless, completely secure room.

The inn's prime branding, found almost everywhere in its décor, visually intertwines George Mason, the Virginia patriot, statesman and writer of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, with the university that bears his name. The lobby's entrance wall, for instance, combines a silhouette of George Mason with large black-and-white reproductions of his signature and a piece of his Declaration of Rights. The mural behind the check-in desk is a photo enlargement of the driveway leading up to Mason's home, Gunston Hall, complemented by the university's colors, green and gold, a color scheme repeated in variations throughout the inn. And the hallway carpet print replicates one of George Mason's handwritten letters.

The inn's large and comfortable bar/lounge, "The Well," evokes a scholar's library with floor-to-ceiling bookcases at both ends that are filled with books associated with Mason the man and Mason the university and large, leather club chairs. The black-and-white photographs on its walls, provided by GMU's Special Collections archives, depict Gunston Hall and various university events.

Guests opening up the booklet on services in each room also will find a copy of a touching tribute Mason wrote in his family Bible after his wife died.

Isaac Thweatt, assistant director of external relations for GMU's School of Management, couldn't be more excited about the addition of the inn to the campus. Walking through on a tour, he said, "It's an absolutely beautiful legacy and definitely adds to the prestige of the university."

"This is a wonderful place to be," Galindo agreed. "It exudes what George Mason [University] wants to be."

Includes:

- 148 rooms with presidential suite
- 175-seat "Boxwoods" restaurant with a private presidential dining room and outdoor patio, serving breakfast, lunch and dinner
- Bar/lounge, "The Well," also serving light fare
- Flexible ballroom space
- 11 technologically cutting-edge meeting rooms,
- Silver-level Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certified, green building

Call 703-865-5705 or visit [www.acc-masoninnandconferencecenter.com](http://www.acc-masoninnandconferencecenter.com) for information

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