

# Renovated Sheraton At Bradley Has Hopes Flying

 [Get Business Mobile Text Alerts](#)

By KENNETH R. GOSSELIN, [kgosselin@courant.com](mailto:kgosselin@courant.com)

The Hartford Courant

6:02 PM EDT, October 6, 2011

When the state's new airport authority meets for the first time next week, it will already have an ace advertisement in its back pocket in the quest to bring a direct flight to Europe back to Bradley International Airport: a top-to-bottom renovation of the airport's hotel.

Changes at the Sheraton Hartford Hotel at Bradley Airport are apparent just a few steps inside the lobby. Gone is the piano and the subdued lounge atmosphere. In its place is a gathering spot with free Wi-Fi, computer stations and jacks to charge cellphones and other electronic devices, catering to both business and leisure travelers.

Nearby, there is a monitor with flight arrivals and departures.

Guest rooms have been outfitted with credenzas and lamps that have easily accessible charging stations, high-definition, flat-screen televisions and bathrooms with granite countertops. A fitness center has been expanded.

James Wakim, president of The Simon Konover Co. in West Hartford, said he and partner The Waterford Group hope the renovations will boost guest bookings at the 237-room hotel. But the vision is broader, they say: the hotel has to be a key amenity as the state seeks to raise the profile of the airport by attracting airlines to add more flight destinations out of Bradley.

"The key here is that this is not just about the hotel, but about the airport being a hub for the state," Wakim said.

Initially, the renovations were to take a year, but they hit a rough patch as the economy plunged into recession, business travel dropped off and commercial financing for hotel projects all but dried up.

It ended up taking three years to complete the makeover, which included reconfiguring conference rooms and introducing an earthtone color scheme. All the work was done with equity investments rather than commercial financing.

Waterford, which now manages or owns 27 hotels in nine states, mostly in Connecticut, bought a 50-percent stake in the Bradley hotel in 2008. At the time, Waterford said it was attracted to the airport because it was growing, with a regularly scheduled flight to Amsterdam and the prospect of more international flights.

The flight to Amsterdam was canceled a few months later, and efforts to revive it failed as the economy sank. That same year, the state turned down an offer from Delta to establish a flight to Paris in 2008, which would have required \$6 million in revenue guarantees over two years. State officials said the risk was too great.

Today, economic development people view the renovated hotel as a piece of the puzzle that could help get an international flight back at Bradley.

Mary Ellen Jones, the airport authority's chairwoman and president of Engine Alliance, a 50-50 joint venture between Pratt & Whitney and General Electric Co., said: "For layovers, you want to have an up-to-date comfortable location. It's what people expect."

Konover developed the hotel, which opened in 1987, and it hadn't undergone a major renovation in two decades, a glittering disco ball still hanging in one of the ballrooms as a glaring piece of evidence.

Mark Wolman, a partner and a top executive, said the renovations cost more than \$5 million, but he declined to name a specific cost. In 2008, when Waterford announced its stake in the hotel, Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, which owns the Sheraton name, said Sheraton property owners would spend \$1.3 billion renovating 100 hotels in North America. The push was an effort to revive a brand that had fallen behind other competitors.

Based on that total, the average cost would be about \$13 million.

Starwood does not own most of its hotels, but controls the brand. Owners such as Konover and Waterford pay to upgrade and maintain buildings.

While Starwood had some requirements — the new lobby, a revamped club lounge, white bedding and the fitness center — Waterford and Konover brought in designers to bring their own touches, including guest room art inspired by nearby tobacco fields.

"It wasn't a package we took off the shelf," Wolman said.

This year's guest room occupancy at the airport has hovered near 75 percent, according to Brien Fox, Waterford's vice president of marketing and sales.

That is stronger than the mid-to-high 60s in 2009, but still below the high 70s and 80s in the mid-2000s, he said.

Even with lower occupancy, the airport hotel is booking more stays than the Hartford area as a whole. According to Smith Travel Research, occupancy in the overall area was 63 percent in June.

Fox said room rates are lagging the strengthening occupancy at the airport and are still below the \$150 or more logged in 2005-2006. The rates are now at the low to mid-\$100s, Fox said.

Business travel is on the upswing, about 6-8 percent more than a year ago, Fox said, but "leisure is still lagging, still has been fairly stagnant, still a challenge."