





SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

by LINDA DECKARD

There were some times during the closing of Mellon Arena and the grand opening of Consol Energy Center in Pittsburgh when Jay Roberts, general manager of both venues for SMG, wasn't sure he could make it through. But, looking back, it went very well.

He had always wanted to open an arena, but he hadn't really comprehended the enormity of running an existing, old and busy arena at the same time he prepared to open a technologically advanced, amenity laden new one. And with no lengthy transition time. And in close proximity. The two venues are literally across the street from each other.

The last event at Mellon Arena was James Taylor and Carole King, June 26. The first event at Consol Energy Center was Paul McCartney on Aug. 18, a month earlier than the projected opening date. The whole process took two years, but the last six months were the most intense at both homes of the Pittsburgh Penguins of the National Hockey League.

"The unions were good partners," Roberts said. Over a year and a half, Roberts negotiated labor contracts to the point everyone on his staff, 600 employees, ended up coming over to the new building.

"We wanted people to be able to continue on," he said.

Of that group, nine had started at Mellon in 1961. They brought the service plaques and veterans with them. Aramark brought over an equal number of employees, so the parade across the street was 1,200 strong.

New did throw everyone for a loop, though. It was not just new technology, but "new places to enter the building; new policies and procedures and upgraded guest service commitment to our guest service promise. We did a lot of change in a short period of time."

It was not just a training program that was needed, noted Leonardo Inghilleri, West Paces Consulting, hired by the Penguins to help with the transition. "It's a major repositioning of an organization. You have to redesign the culture."

Creating the program was a "fairly intensive process," Roberts recalled. They needed to mold three organizations — SMG,



Aramark and Penguins — each with their own culture and guidelines, into one cohesive unit. "We had to come up with one program that spoke to everyone and it was a very long process."

After the move, people suddenly got it. They had no idea what they were missing all those years until they had a few Consol Energy Center events under their belts. "When they saw the wider concourses and

greater food selections and the HD and the video and the loading dock and the terrazzo floors, they realized we were in the Dark Ages and they just didn't know it."

Among the amusing aspects of the big change was the number of comments Roberts heard from fans and clients about how much better the staff at Consol Energy Center was. "We got a lot of comments like 'I went to the event and it was great, we loved the building, the sound, and I'll tell you, the thing I was most surprised about is that the staff at Consol Energy Center is so nice and friendly and helpful. So different than Mellon.' I laughed. It's the same staff, we just put different uniforms on them. And we spent a ton of money and time on a guest services program. I guess it worked."

Roberts has wanted to open a building since he started in the business, he said. "But I never thought about the fact I would be running the old building — a full time job — and helping work on the construction and figuring out how we were going to transition staff at the same time. I hadn't really thought through that part. Midway through it, everyone was looking at me saying, 'what the hell were you thinking Jay?'"

His best advice to anyone attempting this feat in the future?

"That planning process looks good on paper, but it doesn't turn out the way it looks on paper. For sanity's sake, I would recommend splitting up and ramping up staff a lot sooner than I did. If I did it again, I would hire a couple of people a year in advance to focus exclusively on the new building."

Do it again? "I thought I'd done really hard things before but this was definitely the hardest," Roberts said. "Now, it's off my list."

Above: The newly opened Consol Energy Center, Pittsburgh.