

CRAIN'S CLEVELAND BUSINESS

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Spectra steps in to run I-X Center events, as November reopening nears

[Spectra](#), a national management company that runs more than 330 venues, will help to rouse Cleveland's I-X Center from its pandemic-induced slumber.

Industrial Realty Group LLC, the real estate developer that [took over](#) the I-X Center in late August, has picked the Philadelphia-based business to oversee events at the colossal complex. Spectra will be responsible for 500,000 square feet of the 2.2 million-square-foot building.

Silent since mid-March 2020, the I-X Center is being repositioned as a hybrid property. Industrial Realty Group, which purchased the stock of longtime operator I-X Center Corp., plans to preserve a home for popular consumer shows while redeveloping portions of the building and the surrounding land for industrial tenants.

The first show, the [I-X Christmas Connection](#), is set for Nov. 19-21. That puts Spectra and Marketplace Events, the Solon-based company that will produce the event, on a tight timeline.

"We're already in the market," said Dave Anderson, a Spectra regional vice president. "We've been conducting interviews for staff. We've already met with initial clients. ... We are well into what we call the transition process."

The pandemic and government health orders forced the I-X Center offline last year.

In September 2020, longtime operator I-X Center Corp. [announced](#) that it was exiting the event business and laying off 75 workers. That news threw the producers of the Cleveland Auto Show, the Great Big Home and Garden Show, the Ohio RV Supershow and the Progressive Cleveland Boat Show and Fishing Expo [into limbo](#).

After almost a year of uncertainty, IRG stepped in to purchase I-X Center Corp. from its sole owner, family-owned Park Corp. That deal gave the developer control of the city-owned property, through a long-term lease, and all of the trappings to put on shows.

California-based IRG, with joint-venture partner Industrial Commercial Properties LLC of Solon, is reimagining the real estate. From the outset, though, the developer planned to hire an expert to shepherd events. And there was a very short list of companies capable of running a facility like the I-X Center — let alone reopening it in less than 90 days.

Peter Goffstein, an IRG senior vice president, acknowledged that the company talked to [ASM Global](#), the major venue manager that runs the Huntington Convention Center of Cleveland downtown. But Spectra, which once managed the Wolstein Center, won out.

"They put together a first-class business plan and a plan to restart the convention center business that we really liked — with a team that we really liked," Goffstein said.

Anderson described the I-X Center as "a clean palette," an infinitely flexible space that could host anything from athletic tournaments to conferences to concerts.

"Mr. Park and his team did an incredible job with that building," Anderson said of Ray Park, the nonagenarian Park Corp. chairman who transformed the onetime bomber plant into an exposition center in the 1980s. "We really want to build on what he has done. ... We see an opportunity to really increase the portfolio of events, and the uniqueness."

It's not clear how many employees Spectra will need to make the building hum. Before the pandemic, the I-X Center required a crew of 400 to 500 people at its seasonal peak.

Spectra has started conversations with Teamsters Local 507, which represented the workers, and is talking to former and would-be employees, Anderson said. He also has heard from local businesses interested in joining a food-and-beverage lineup that is still taking shape.

IRG has been flooded with inquiries from potential employees and exhibitors — along with consumers hoping for the return of their favorite events.

"We were inundated with calls from anyone and everybody who's either been associated with it, wants to be associated with it, and is looking forward to us restarting the convention business," Goffstein said.

Marketplace Events, which produces dozens of consumer shows across North America, stepped up to revive the Christmas Connection. The company puts on the Great Big Home and Garden Show, which is [returning](#) to the I-X Center in February.

The Christmas show will feature at least 300 exhibitors and will look and feel familiar to Clevelanders, said Tom Baugh, the company's CEO. Marketplace Events expects to buy the Christmas show from I-X Center Corp., which owns a stable of events including the I-X Indoor Amusement Park and the Piston Powered Auto-Rama.

"We're working through a deal for how to operate that show with them in the future, which could be a sale, yes," Goffstein confirmed.

Marketplace produces other holiday shows, including the expansive Southern Christmas Show in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Pulling the I-X event together in only a few months is an unprecedented lift, Baugh said. But the rush is worth it to bring consumers a feel-good show on top of the feel-good moment of the building reopening, particularly as the pandemic drags on and winter sets in.

Spectra, which took over a cluster of spaces at Chicago's Navy Pier in early 2020 and manages facilities including the Duke Energy Convention Center in Cincinnati, has been reopening venues across the country as government shutdowns lift.

Sponsorships and business meetings are coming back slowly, Anderson said. Many concerts and sporting events are drawing crowds. Traffic at consumer shows varies.

Spectra's job, he said, is to instill confidence in clients, attendees and employees, in hopes that one event will beget another. And another.

The company's first I-X Center client is feeling optimistic.

"It's a very unique situation," Baugh said. "I have no comparative. I really don't. The fact that this thing was closed and shuttered, and now it's reopened — and all the parties want the show element of the building to be vibrant for as long as IRG has control of that building — it's just very satisfying to be a part of it."