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Transformed Fort Lauderdale to Host Super Bowl

By FRED A. BERNSTEIN

The game will be over in one evening — but for Fort Lauderdale hotels, the after-party could last years.

On Feb. 7, Super Bowl XLIV will be played at Dolphin Stadium, at the northern edge of Miami-Dade County. But, in a break with the past, N.F.L. officials, Super Bowl sponsors and many of the journalists covering the game will be staying in Fort Lauderdale, 18 miles north of the stadium, rather than in Miami.

The shift, according to Frank Supovitz, senior vice president for events at the National Football League, “was a function of us just having been in South Florida three years ago” — when the 2007 Super Bowl was held in the same stadium. According to Mr. Supovitz, the N.F.L. “wanted to present a Super Bowl that was new and fresh and looked different.” That meant choosing locations in Fort Lauderdale, rather than Miami, for most bowl-related events.

The move north could not have happened without a building boom that has transformed Fort Lauderdale.

On highway A1A, which skirts the ocean, the midcentury motels that once defined Fort Lauderdale are gone, replaced by a row of gigantic resort hotels, including the 374-room Hilton Fort Lauderdale Beach Resort, which opened in 2007; the roughly 200-room Ritz-Carlton, Fort Lauderdale (which opened in 2007 as a St. Regis); and the W Fort Lauderdale, a \$205 million behemoth that opened in April, 2009.

Also on the strip is the 433-room Westin Beach Resort, Fort Lauderdale, which was the Sheraton Yankee Trader until 2008, when it closed for a makeover and a name change. Last July, the hotel unveiled a spa and gym and an ocean-view Starbucks. In December, it opened a 25,000-square-foot conference center. In a sign of the times, a small motel was torn down to make way for the center.

For at least two weeks before the game, that conference center will house temporary N.F.L. offices, and all of the hotel’s 433 rooms have been reserved by the league.

Once the Westin was chosen as the headquarters hotel, the league set out to secure other hotel rooms in close proximity to the Westin, creating a campus feel, Mr. Supovitz said.

When it was selected, in 2007, the new Westin was “just a rendering and a set of blueprints,” said the hotel’s general manager, Amaury Piedra. Mr. Supovitz was confident the hotel would be done in time, given the exposure the Super Bowl would bring. “We were vigilant, but not nervous,” he said about the hotel’s renovation.

Around the same time, the league decided to put the Super Bowl media center in the Broward County Convention Center, also in Fort Lauderdale. Once that decision was made, “we needed to make sure we had enough hotel rooms for the 4,000 or so accredited media who are there,” Mr. Supovitz said.

Luckily, the Fort Lauderdale area has added some 3,200 hotel rooms — or about 10 percent of its total — in just the last five years, according to Nicki E. Grossman, president of the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The N.F.L. secured one hotel for each of the competing teams: the Harbor Beach Marriott Resort and Spa, in Fort Lauderdale, which has just completed its own \$50 million renovation, for the A.F.C. champion, and the Intercontinental in downtown Miami for its N.F.C. rival. And because players bring friends and family, each team requires at least one “spillover hotel,” Mr. Supovitz said.

In addition, the league reserved rooms for thousands of sponsors, broadcasters and others, for both the Super Bowl and the Pro Bowl, which will be played in the same stadium on Jan. 31. Altogether, the league contracted for 15,238 rooms shortly before the location was announced in 2005. (At the time, the arena was called Dolphin Stadium. Since then, it has become Land Shark Stadium, in a temporary naming deal that will expire before the Super Bowl. It has also been known as Pro Player Stadium and Joe Robbie Stadium.)

But last August, just before a Sept. 1 deadline in its contract with the hotels, the league released 5,000 of those rooms, which made big news in Miami. The Miami Herald named the Mandarin Oriental as one of 17 hotels that had been dropped entirely, and the Doubletree Grand in downtown Miami as one where the number of reservations was reduced.

Mr. Supovitz said that since Miami-Dade had the biggest room inventory, it was “not surprising” that the most dropped rooms were from there. He said the league released the rooms because the prices that it had agreed to four years ago were, in many cases, higher than the prices available today. Releasing the rooms gave fans and sponsors the ability to negotiate lower rates, he said.

That left Miami hoteliers with rooms to fill. Barry Moskowitz, vice president for sales at the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau, said in December that, compared to the last time the Super Bowl came to South Florida, rooms in Miami “are available at more competitive rates. It all comes down to supply and demand.”

At the Mandarin Oriental, Jill DeMone, the director for sales and marketing, said some rooms were still available during the Super Bowl, but that the hotel was filling up. “Not everybody wants to be in Fort Lauderdale. Some people still want to be in Miami, so we’re still doing very well,” she said.

In Fort Lauderdale, where hoteliers know the guests are coming, the pressures are different. Mr. Piedra has spent four years getting the Westin ready for its Super Bowl debut. At the same time, he has also managed the transformation of the former Sheraton Yankee Clipper, a beachfront resort about a mile south of the Westin, into the new Sheraton Fort Lauderdale Beach Hotel.

All of its roughly 450 rooms have been booked by the N.F.L. for employees and sponsors, he said. But the last stage of the renovation will not be finished until about a week before the game, he said. The Super Bowl provided a deadline, he added, for work that would have been done anyway.

But the construction projects were begun during a flush economy. Hotel occupancy in Fort Lauderdale declined in the 12 months through November 2009, the last month for which figures were available, even as the average room rate fell more than 16 percent, according to Smith Travel Research. And the high-end Fort Lauderdale hotels face stiff competition. Thirteen hotels, nine of them new or completely remodeled, are part of a group that the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention and Visitors Bureau has named the Lauderdale Luxe collection (each of which has four-star, four-diamond or better ranking, full-service restaurant and spa).

“There is no question that we’ve never needed a Super Bowl as badly as we need this one,” Ms. Grossman of the visitors bureau said.