November 13, 2011 6:26 PM Diane Turbyfill

Gastonia Mayor Jennie Stultz answered the question she's been hearing for years when asked why build a conference center.

"Today we're saying, 'Why not Gastonia?'" Stultz said before an applauding crowd Sunday afternoon.

Stultz and a lineup of city council members and contributors to the Gastonia Conference Center took the mic and described their pride in turning a 30-year-old idea into a reality.

A crowd of approximately 200 people stood on Marietta Street as city officials stood at the podium in front of the Gastonia Conference Center and talked of the budding idea that finally found its time. The assembly cheered the grand opening of the 30,000-square-foot facility.

But it also signified a giant step toward a bright future for the downtown area, according to City Councilwoman Brenda Craig.

"This is a beginning of new life," she said.

City officials have discussed the possibility of such a facility for three decades. And in 2010 all of the pieces fit. The groundbreaking kicked off construction in October 2010.

Building the $10-million building brought work to hundreds of construction workers and will continue to generate jobs, according to City Manager James Palenick.

Palenick commended his staff and past and present city council members for the dedication and hard work to complete the environmentally-sound structure. The center followed strict guidelines to obtain designation by the U.S. Green Building Council.

Palenick said the center has already been booked for several occasions that should bring in about $200,000.

City council members said they envisioned the conference center being a hub for a myriad of events from wedding receptions and galas to class reunions and high school proms.

Once the red ribbon was cut Sunday afternoon, the crowd filed inside through the glass doors and got their first look inside.

Table displays were set up in a large conference area, while interviews with planners and city council members played on large screens.

Much of downtown Gastonia is visible through the building's large windows.

Spectators weaved in and out of the meeting halls and conference rooms while a band played in the foyer.

Stultz wore a large smile throughout the event, from making introductions to unveiling the plaque that will adorn the inside of the conference center.

Just before letting the crowd in the front doors for a first look, she announced that it was time to celebrate.

"We're ready to party," she said.

You can reach Diane Turbyfill at 704-869-1817.

Read more: http://www.gastongazette.com/articles/stultz-63404-gastonia-jennie.html#ixzz1dpgGIM25