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The new glass and brick Sheraton Hotel in downtown Duluth was a beehive of activity Wednesday as employees and contractors made final preparations for the hotel's opening this morning.

"Today it's the final details — the dusting, the cleaning. All the rooms are getting their final check," Teresa Glatz, director of sales and marketing, said Wednesday. "It'll be a late night."

A ribbon-cutting for the 147-room hotel, at 311 E. Superior St., is scheduled at 9 a.m. today and is open to the public. The Sheraton signs will light up for the first time tonight.

The Sheraton, part of the worldwide Starwood hotel chain, cost \$40 million to build and is the most expensive hotel ever constructed in the city, according to developer and owner George Sherman.

It is the first new hotel to open in downtown and Canal Park in five years. Today's opening marks the end of more than three years of planning and construction by Sherman Associates, George Sherman's company.

The Sheraton has suites and standard rooms with plasma TVs, Internet connections and other amenities. Many rooms have views of Lake Superior and historic photos of the Duluth area hang on the walls.

Standard room rates range from \$99 to \$249 per night. Special rates will be offered to hospital patients and their families, Glatz said.

The hotel also has meeting rooms, a restaurant and bar that are open to the public, a fitness center, swimming pool, free parking and a skywalk to a parking ramp across the alley and to SMDC Health System.

Several years ago, when SMDC was planning its First Street building, it was seeking a hotel to serve its patients. After talking with local hotel companies, Sherman said, the health system approached him.

Visitors will find a decor with lots of dark wood and earth-tone colors in the rooms and lobby. The lobby has a slate floor with plaid rugs and leather chairs in sitting areas.

"This clearly is ... the four-star, five-star hotel of Duluth right now," Sherman said. "It clearly is the place where the top business travelers will stay."

The top floors of the 11-story building are high-end condominiums. In fact, Sherman said, this is the first project in the state to have condos atop a hotel. Twenty-two of 33 units have been sold.

The first condo owners will take possession in mid-June, Sherman said.

"It's exciting," said Terry Mattson, president of Visit Duluth. "The Sheraton is a truly impeccable property."

A second new hotel, the Canal Park Lodge, is scheduled to open soon.

Mattson predicted that each new hotel will develop its own following, although "to a certain extent all hotels are competing for the same customer."

What the new development shows, he said, is that the local tourism industry is doing well. "If there wasn't a thriving hospitality industry, there wouldn't be [a new] building," he said.

Glatz guessed that the hotel will rent about 30 rooms over Memorial Day weekend. Bookings for the rest of the summer have been very strong, Sherman said.