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**Philadelphia's Mayor
Made a Long-Shot Bid
To Land Convention**

**But Ed Rendell Was Vindicated
When Republicans Selected
The City of Brotherly Love**

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PHILADELPHIA -- Fresh from the 1996 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Philadelphia Mayor Edward G. Rendell assembled local business and political leaders from both parties for a startling announcement: Philadelphia would try to land a presidential convention of its own.

"They looked at me like I was absolutely stone crazy," Mr. Rendell recalls four days after a Republican site-selection team chose this Democratic stronghold as the location of the party's 2000 convention.

"One of the biggest problems this city has had for years is people don't know how good it is," the mayor says. In a place where an early 1970s billboard proclaimed, "Philadelphia isn't as bad as Philadelphians say it is," he isn't kidding.

"Slowly but surely, we were able to make believers out of everybody," says Mr. Rendell, 54 years old, an energetic native New Yorker credited with writing much of the City of Brotherly Love's ruins-to-renewal story over the past six years. Beyond Pennsylvania, believers included the Democratic Party, which had listed Philadelphia as a top contender for its own convention before the GOP filled the city's dance card last Thursday.

(Philadelphia had to bow out of the Democratic selection process once it clinched the GOP affair.)

Mr. Rendell, Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge and other dignitaries celebrated at a City Hall news conference, with the mayor drinking straight from a champagne bottle, wearing an elephant tie and posing that Philly, the nation's fifth-largest city with a population of 1.5 million, no longer would be a mere stopover between New York and Washington.

New York and Chicago were among the seven also-rans in the race for the Republican convention.

"It's a big coup," says David Thornburgh, executive director of the

nonprofit Pennsylvania Economy League. "Ten years ago, we weren't even playing this game. We didn't have the hotels. We had a dumpy old convention center. We've scaled the peak and planted the flag and said, 'Here we are.'"

Officials have attributed Philadelphia's successful bid to the outstanding hospitality shown to the site-selection committee, the bipartisan teamwork of Democrat Mr. Rendell and Republican Gov. Ridge, patriotic landmarks like the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall, and a proposal that promises free 18-hour-a-day transportation for 35,000 delegates and journalists.

On a more fundamental level, Philadelphia couldn't have won the convention without a 1990s building boom that produced the sleek Pennsylvania Convention Center five years ago, the two-year-old First Union Center arena and thousands of new hotel rooms.

Mr. Rendell can't take credit for all that growth; the Pennsylvania Convention Center effort, centerpiece of the city's growing convention business, began a decade before his mayorship. But many praise him as the general in the city's revival and its GOP triumph.

"The teamwork from all facets of the city was really overwhelming, but you've got to have a leader," says Mike Gamble, senior vice president, sales and marketing, at the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Mayor Rendell, he says, assembled the Philadelphia 2000 team that wrote the winning bid, including co-chairmen Brian Roberts, president of Comcast Corp.; and lawyer David Cohen, the mayor's highly regarded former chief of staff.

"One thing Rendell has added to Philadelphia is an image of vigor that was lacking before," says Barbara Ferman, a political-science professor at Temple University. "Philadelphia went from being this sort of we-hate-ourselves kind of city to getting Ed Rendell as a sort of booster."

Beyond his cheerleading, she says, the mayor, aided by a strong national economy and local business leaders, helped return the city from its financial abyss.

When Mr. Rendell entered office in 1992, Philadelphia faced a surging \$150 million deficit and a junk-bond rating from Wall Street. It was losing thousands of jobs a year. The new mayor called for "gut-wrenching" fiscal changes and got tough with municipal workers' unions.

The city registered a \$169 million budget surplus in the fiscal year that ended in June and gained 6,500 new jobs in 1997.

By no means is all rosy in a city where nearly 80% of public-school students live in poverty, budgetary problems plague the school district, deadly shootings are a local news staple, and a mid-1990s police corruption scandal led authorities to overturn hundreds of drug convictions.

But there has been progress. Theaters have sprung up along the "Avenue of the Arts," a stretch of Broad Street where officials will break ground this week on the centerpiece, a \$245 million regional performing-arts center. And the city recently hired a new get-tough police commissioner, John Timoney.

When Mr. Rendell pitched the convention idea two years ago, the region lacked the 20,000 hotel rooms the parties said they needed. The mayor called for 2,000 new rooms by 2000.

Since then, 13 hotel projects have gotten under way, more than half with some financial aid from the city. Thanks also to a boom in the U.S. hotel industry, Philadelphia's downtown now has 4,000 new rooms in the pipeline for the year 2000, a roughly 60% increase, says the convention bureau's Mr. Gamble.

Republican National Committee spokesman Tim Fitzpatrick says the party's choice was primarily based on physical requirements.

"Philadelphia had a very sound proposal for transportation," says Mr. Fitzpatrick. "They had the right mix of hotels in terms of the cost per delegate, the quantity, quality and location of hotel rooms.

"They had the best (open bracket)facilities(close bracket) to hold the convention and convention-related events; they had a good sound financial package; and they had a good combination of activities for delegates and their families to take part in when events are not in session."

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