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BUSINESSES, RESTAURANTS, HOTELS ALL SCORING FROM ALL-STAR CLASSIC

The letters A-H-L are spelling big business for downtown Allentown's restaurants and retailers.

The American Hockey League is holding its annual AHL All-Star Classic at the PPL Center this year and the big event is tonight.

After a weekend of skills competitions, tailgating and honors, which brought thousands to the city and the Lehigh Valley, tonight's All-Star Game is expected to cap off three days of excitement with some of the nation's best up-and-coming hockey players competing.

The arena's management, Comcast Spectacor, worked to make the event an all-star experience, bringing in its top chefs to make special upscale versions of traditional arena fare and creating an atmosphere that will leave a lasting impression.

Gunnar Fox, general manager for the PPL center, said there has been excitement surrounding the event.

"It's been really fantastic. We had standing-room-only for the Skills Competition last night and we expect the same for tonight," he said.

The arena seats about 8,500 for a regular hockey game.

The center and the team also worked with downtown merchants to make Allentown hockey central for the three day event.

Betsy Kohl, Hamilton District Main Street Manager for the Allentown Chamber of Commerce, said there is a lot of participation from merchants to tie into the event.

"The arena actually had posters and pins made for businesses to hang up and for staff to wear," Kohl said. "We distributed them to 35 businesses to say 'welcome' to anyone who was in town for the AHL."

In addition, Kohl said they handed out 250 "swag bags" to AHL players, coaches and families in town for the competition, and she said she's been told coupons and other offers in the bags are being redeemed.

Some merchants have their own promotions.

Kohl said Sorrelli is selling jewelry to match team colors, and the Moravian Book Shop is selling Allentown T-shirts and postcards for souvenirs.

Kohl warned that downtown restaurants were packed over the weekend and should be again tonight for anyone looking to catch dinner before the game, so allow time.

But there will be shopping. Kohl said many of the merchants are having extended hours tonight to greet those coming downtown for the game.

She said Allentown's hotels have also done well with the event.

Kohl said the Renaissance was completely booked and the Holiday Inn Center City had 175 rooms out of 224 booked.