



Indianapolis welcomed hundreds of thousands to the city over Memorial Day Weekend, with 345,000 race fans attending the 108th running of the Indianapolis 500, plus two Eastern Conference NBA games. To celebrate, Visit Indy hosted 60+ meeting planners and guests for a familiarization trip around the city, which ended with the group experiencing the Indy 500 in a suite overlooking the start and finish line.

## ACLU-Represented NRA Wins Supreme Court Decision on Free Speech

By Todd McElwee

The Supreme Court (SCOTUS) has ruled the National Rifle Association (NRA) can pursue a lawsuit against former New York Department of Financial Services (DFS) Superintendent Maria Vullo, who the association alleges violated the First Amendment by coercing DFS-regulated parties to punish or suppress the NRA's gun advocacy after the 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida.

In a unanimous decision on May 30, SCOTUS returned the case to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 2nd Circuit, the *Washington Post* reported. The suit was initially filed in May 2018.

**“This victory is a win for the NRA in the fight to protect freedom,” said NRA President Bob Barr.**

“This victory is a win for the NRA in the fight to protect freedom,” said NRA President Bob Barr. “This is a historic moment for the NRA in its stand against governmental overreach. Let this be clear: the voice of the NRA membership is as loud and influential as ever. Regulators are now on notice: this is a win for not only the NRA, but every organization who might otherwise suffer from an abuse of government power.”

The NRA was supported in the matter by an unlikely ally: the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The organization represented the NRA in arguing that any government attempt to blacklist an advocacy group because of its viewpoint vio-

lates the First Amendment.

David Cole, ACLU's National Legal Director who argued the case, said: “Today's decision confirms that government officials have no business using their regulatory authority to blacklist disfavored political groups. The New York state officials involved here, former Gov. Andrew Cuomo and his chief financial regulator, Maria Vullo, were clear that they sought to punish the NRA because they disagreed with its gun rights advocacy. The Supreme Court has now made crystal clear that this action is unconstitutional.”

Writing for the court, Justice Sonia Sotomayor referenced a 60-year-old precedent that government officials cannot use their substantial powers to try to quash points of view they do not like, the *Post* said.

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# NEWS

## Jim Garrett Retiring as Head of Visit Chicago Southland

By Jonathan Trager

Jim Garrett, CDME, who has served as President & CEO of Visit Chicago Southland since 1996, will retire from his post on June 30.

Formerly the Chicago Southland CVB, the organization represents Chicago's south and southwest suburbs. Garrett's retirement was announced on May 28.

"It has been an honor and a privilege representing the Chicago Southland region for the past 28 years," said Garrett. "I sincerely appreciate the continued and valued support I've received from the Executive Committee and Board of Directors for the trust they placed in me in leading the Bureau."

During Garrett's tenure, Visit Chicago

Southland earned the 2024 Illinois Excellence in Tourism Award for Best Website by the Illinois Office of Tourism and received Diversity Inc.'s 2011 Community Spirit Award.

Individually, Garrett received the Illinois State Soccer Association's Presidential Award, the Illinois Hotel and Lodging Association's 2007 Ambassador of Hospitality Award, and the Upper Midwest CVB's 2012 Individual Professionalism and Lifetime Achievement Award. He was also recognized as one of the Chicago Southland's Five Most Influential Leaders by Midwest Publishing – Elite Magazine.

"On behalf of the entire Board of Directors, we want to sincerely thank Jim for his 28 years of service and dedication in making Visit Chicago

Southland not only one of the finest tourism organizations in the State of Illinois but in the nation," said Visit Chicago Southland Chairman Richard Brink. "We wish Jim many years of enjoyment and travels as he begins his journey of retirement."

Garrett earned several industry certifications from the World Tourism Management Center at Purdue University. He also served on a myriad of committees and boards, including the President's Advisory Board at Governor's State University, the Executive Advisory Council at St. Xavier's University, and the Executive Committee of the Illinois Council of Convention and Visitors Bureaus.

"Most importantly, all the credit for Visit Chicago Southland successes goes to the incredible Visit Chicago Southland staff who reflect the passion and professionalism of our organization," said Garrett. "The last 28 years have been the best years of my life, and I am extremely proud of our many accomplishments. I can

honestly say being President/CEO of Visit Chicago Southland has been the best job I have ever had and a true joy."

Prior to Visit Chicago Southland, Garrett served as executive director of the Cedar Rapids CVB in Iowa; vice president of the Wichita CVB in Kansas; and director of sales and marketing for the Little Rock CVB.



Jim Garrett

## Former Colorado Hotel Owner Indicted on Covid Fraud Charges

By Jordan Bradley

The former owner of a Denver hotel, Amin Sulieman of Miami, was indicted by a federal grand jury in Colorado on four counts of wire fraud, the U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Colorado announced on May 22.

According to the U.S. Attorney's Office, Sulieman—at the time owner and co-owner of several Colorado businesses including Nativ Denver and Nativ Hotel Group—requested COVID-19 Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL) from the Small Business Administration (SBA) "and obtained \$450,000 as a result of false representations."

At the time that Sulieman sought and received those funds—from August 2020 through approximately May 2022—the companies were allegedly not operable. And in the case of one of the companies "Sulieman had told a bankruptcy court [it] was closed," according to the U.S. District Attorney's Office.

According to reporting from the *Denver Post*, Sulieman applied for four EIDLs, three of which were approved, wherein he allegedly claimed an inaccurate numbers of employees, falsified application documents including bank statements and water bills in order to make it appear as though properties were viable and in operation.

In November 2020, Sulieman allegedly applied for two EIDL loans using false documentation and received \$300,000 on behalf of two of his businesses. He is being accused

of spending those loan funds on "travel, rent, 'large cash withdrawals' and unspecified 'retail purchases,'" according to the *Post*.

In April 2022, Sulieman allegedly applied for a loan on behalf of Nativ Hotel Group's hotel, Nativ Denver, for the amount of \$150,000 despite allegedly knowing the hotel had ceased operations by that time. When it was granted by the SBA, Sulieman allegedly used those funds for nightclubs in Texas, the *Post* reported.

The U.S. District Attorney's Office, District of Colorado did not respond to *USAE* request for a copy of the indictment by press deadline.

"We look forward to our day in court," said Sulieman's lawyer, Harvey Steinberg of Springer & Steinberg, in an interview with the *Post*. "We feel that we will be completely vindicated and that will happen, hopefully, sooner than later."

The D.A.'s Office noted that Sulieman made an initial appearance in front of a Miami judge regarding the accusations on May 14, and the *Post* reported that he was arrested the same day. A future date will be set in a Colorado court, according to the D.A.'s Office.

In March 2020, the U.S. Government enacted the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Under the CARES Act, the SBA was authorized to provide EIDLs to qualifying small businesses "experiencing substantial financial disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic," according to the D.A.'s Office.

## Average Room Rate in NYC Hotels Hits Record High

By Jordan Bradley

The average rate for a hotel room in New York City has reached a record high of \$301 per night.

Analysts and industry professionals can pinpoint this high to these major causes: NYC hotels housing approximately 65,000 migrants and asylum seekers, inflation, enforcement of a 2022 law that bans residents from renting their homes for fewer than 30 days throughout the city, and a slowed construction pipeline for new hotels.

"Most, if not all, [of] the rate increase is due to [that] compression," said Vijay Dandapani, President and CEO of the Hotel Association of New York City (HANYC).

Dandapani noted "two caveats" to the situation. First, while there are 16,000 hotel rooms being used for migrants, another factor in the record rates is the 6,000 hotel rooms that closed as a result of the pandemic.

"That has caused compression resulting in higher rates all the way up the rate chain," Dandapani said. "Secondly, when adjusted for inflation, RevPar for 2023 was just about even with 2019 numbers. We are not yet

at the halfway point and rates in the Fall and early winter could rise. But right now, both June and July look soft based on forward bookings, which probably will result in 2024 being only marginally better than last year, and perhaps just about ahead of 2019 when adjusted for inflation."

Currently, there are more than 16,500 guest rooms at approximately 135 of NYC's 680 hotels housing more than 65,000 migrants and asylum seekers. The city and HANYC entered into a contract with the city under its Sanctuary Hotel Program, which was established in late 2022.

According to reporting from the *New York Times*, city officials said hotels that have agreed to house asylum seekers receive between \$139 to \$185 per room per night, regardless of whether that room is occupied or vacant.

However, earlier reports from *Bloomberg* in June last year found that "in many cases, the city is paying premium daily rates to house the migrants—forking over \$311 a night at the two-star Holiday Inn Express on Kings Highway in Brooklyn and \$200 a night at the once-posh Roosevelt

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# HOTS

*HOTS Yogi Bear Strikes Again... A California bear made off with a Monrovia family's Oreo cookies, according to a May 29 UPI report. A video was caught of the sweet-toothed burglar, showing the bear breaking into the home through a window and leaving with the iconic blue package dangling from its maw. A neighbor told local news KABC-TV that the same bear visited her garage and stole a chocolate cake from her refrigerator. "I Feel like I can't leave a window open even with a screen because he literally took the screen out," said Vina Khoury, the neighbor, "so that's a little alarming for me." Neighbors have taken to call-*

*ing the bear "Oreo" after the incident. HOTS is sure Oreo is smarter than the average bear.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*HOTS Manhattanhenge 2024... New Yorkers were treated to the first phase of a bi-annual phenomenon called Manhattanhenge on May 28. Manhattanhenge—a term coined by astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson in 1997 and a play on Stone Henge—occurs when the alignment of the sun's setting path coincides with the Manhattan street grid "and sinks below the horizon framed in a canyon of skyscrapers," the Huffington Post reports. The first instance of the phenomenon was witnessed this year on May 28 with an encore on May 29, each around 8:12 p.m. The event is a photographer favorite, and it can be witnessed again this July 12 and 13. HOTS thinks those are some stellar skyline views.*



In late May, the Philadelphia CVB (PHLCVB) was joined by more than 200 representatives from partner organizations for a tailgate and networking at Xfinity Live! Philadelphia before heading to Citizens Bank Park to watch the Phillies defeat the Texas Rangers. Shown here (left to right): Allison Cole, Embassy Suites by Hilton Philadelphia Airport; Mike Barreto, Metropolis Passenger Logistics; and Andrea Barreto, Metropolis Passenger Logistics.

WEEKLY NEWS OF ASSOCIATIONS CVB AND HOTELS

# USAEE

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## Court Decision

*continued from page 1*

"One can reasonably infer from the complaint that Vullo coerced DFS-regulated entities to cut their ties with the NRA in order to stifle the NRA's gunpromotion advocacy and advance her views on gun control," she wrote in the opinion.

The opinion noted nothing in this case gives advocacy groups such as the NRA a "right to absolute immunity from government investigation," or a "right to disregard [state or federal] laws." It added, nothing here prevents government officials from forcefully

condemning views with which they disagree. For those permissible actions, the Constitution "relies first and foremost on the ballot box, not on rules against viewpoint discrimination, to check the government when it speaks."

"Yet where, as here, a government official makes coercive threats in a private meeting behind closed doors, the 'ballot box' is an especially poor check on that official's authority," Sotomayor wrote. "Ultimately, the critical takeaway is that the First Amendment prohibits government officials from wielding their power selectively to punish or suppress speech, directly or (as alleged

here) through private intermediaries."

In filings, Vullo's attorneys disputed she improperly coerced firms into parting with the NRA, the *Post* said. Her attorneys said the insurance products at issue broke New York law and posed "a serious and unique risk to public safety," so it was reasonable for her to prioritize them.

"The NRA alleges that Vullo interfered with its relationships with insurers and banks, limiting only what the NRA could do, not what it could say," her attorneys wrote. "The NRA has never claimed, much less plausibly so, that it was unable to exercise its speech rights."

## ASAE Showcasing Cleveland with Annual Meeting Social Slate

By Todd McElwee

ASAE is working to ensure attendees of ASAE's Annual Meeting & Exposition experience how much Cleveland rocks. The conference's dance card is highlighted by the Opening and Closing Celebrations on August 10 and 13, respectively, with The Classic coming in between on August 12.

"Network with attendees, connect with ASAE staff, and get the most out of your ASAE Membership and your time at this year's ASAE Annual Meeting," ASAE said.

Hosted at Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse—home of the Cleveland Cavaliers—the Opening Celebration will feature what ASAE

called a "dream team of local chefs to whip up delicacies and dishes that are quintessentially Cleveland." Gameday entertainment is also on tap.

"Once you've scoped out all the sights in the FieldHouse, settle in for a welcome feast of epic proportions," organizers said. "Allow our dream team of local chefs to whip up delicacies and dishes that are quintessentially Cleveland—with a side of exciting game-day entertainment to ensure that your 2024 ASAE Annual Meeting & Exposition experience starts off with a bang."

Cranking the volume to 11, the ASAE Research Foundation is staging The Classic at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Encompassing the museum's exhibit and plaza, the party will include local fare and libations and live

music. Separate ticket purchases are required.

The Flats Entertainment District is the site of the Closing Celebration. The Flats East Bank is a waterfront neighborhood filled with restaurants and bars that recently has undergone a multi-million-dollar makeover.

"No one likes goodbyes, but even the best trips can't last forever," ASAE said. "Take in one last picturesque Cleveland sunset down in The Flats East Bank—a waterfront neighborhood hopping with restaurants and bars. And it's all looking better than ever after a multimillion-dollar makeover."

Find more information at [annual.asaecenter.org](http://annual.asaecenter.org).



## LEADING LADIES

# Tourism Diversity Matters' Hattie Hill Loves When It All Comes Together

By Jordan Bradley

Hattie Hill has built a successful, 30-plus-year career on helping others in corporate settings find success through her consulting company, Hattie Hill Enterprises.

Throughout her career, Hill has worked with multinational companies such as IBM, McDonald's and Southwest Airlines—just to name a few—to adjust company culture, business management, financial and human resources strategies; diversity, equity and inclusion policies, and offered workshops and other educational services to executives and company leaders. Hill is also the author of three books and frequently speaks at industry events.

But for all of Hill's success in the consulting biz, she has had one major failure, she said.

"My biggest thing I failed at is retirement because I don't do that," Hill told *USAEXtra*.

After more than 30 years on the road, Hill needed a change of pace and "decided that I wanted to try something different." Given her experience working with companies and CEOs in transition, stepping into an open role with the Women's Food Service Forum made sense, she said.

"I'm accustomed to going into an organization looking at strategy, looking

at structure, looking at people [and] finances so the basic components of running an organization has always been a part of my DNA," Hill said.

Since her non-retirement, Hill has acted as interim CEO for the Women's Food Service Forum and the T.D. JAKES Foundation. After that, Hill stepped in early this year as the interim CEO for the Texas Women's Foundation before the non-profit tapped Karen Hughes White to lead this April.

Most recently, Hill can be found leading Tourism Diversity Matters (TDM) as interim CEO. The position with the organization opened after the ousting of Greg DeShields as executive director following accusations that he created a toxic work environment this February.

In her position as interim CEO, Hill is overseeing day-to-day operations and handling all CEO responsibilities while working with TDM's chair, board and staff to adopt and implement new strategies, and find a permanent CEO.

Hill's work with TDM was just beginning at the end of May, she told *USAEXtra*, and involved two main components: asking questions and listening to gather as much understanding about the inner workings of the org as possible before she digs in and starts making changes.

So what motivates Hill to step into the role of interim CEO at a time when

a company is in a chapter of instability and change?

"It's because I love to watch things come together," Hill said. "And that's what you do in the interim. You look at the strategy, you look at the structure, you look at the people and you go, 'Wow, this really has some potential,' and you build from there."

Diversity, equity and inclusion have been a cornerstone of Hill's work, she said.

Hill spent two years consulting with companies in South Africa during apartheid to help manage cultural issues. She was in the country when apartheid ended in 1994—the 30th anniversary of which passed this April.

"I remember getting on the plane to fly back, and I thought, 'This is something I'll remember for the rest of my life,'" Hill said.

One of the biggest challenges Hill said she runs into when it comes to crafting diversity, equity and inclusion policies is the misperception that those policies are about dictating and following a prescribed set of rules within the workplace.

"Diversity, equity and inclusion is about people," Hill said. "And so as long as you have people, it's going



Hattie Hill

to morph and change and evolve depending on the people in your organization. When companies start focusing on what they don't want to do around people, what you're really doing is pushing people away. Because people want to come into a workplace where they feel like they belong; they feel like they're connected."

## Syracuse Approves Additional Tax on Hotels & Short-Term Rentals

By Jordan Bradley

The Common Council of the City of Syracuse, New York, unanimously adopted a resolution to levy a 2% occupancy tax increase on hotels, motels and short-term rentals in the city on May 20.

The 2% tax increase is intended to support the city's general fund in order to be invested back into the Syracuse community in order to support a \$20 million to \$30 million structural deficit faced each year.

"Over the past several years we've increased taxes twice, we've increased sewer rates, water rates, and we've really squeezed the people," said Corey Williams, 3rd District Councilor, in an interview with WSYR-TV. "If we have the opportunity to generate revenue that doesn't impact our residents then that's something we really want to take advantage of."

Before the tax can go into effect, the measure will need to be approved by the state legislature and signed by

New York's Governor Kathy Hochul.

Visit Syracuse's President and CEO Danny Leidka told *USAEXtra* he does not support the use of the money generated by the tax as it has been proposed by the council.

"The spirit of the legislation statewide is that money should be used to promote tourism," Leidka said. "The city is taking the new bed tax to fix a budget deficit that has existed

for many years instead of fixing their problem budgetarily. They're trying to put it on the backs of people from out of town. So it's not the right use of the money."

With two major hotels in the city closing or about to close – the Crowne Plaza and Sheraton, which are being transformed into studio apartments and student housing respectively – area hotels will feel a squeeze, Leidka said.

And should the tax be applied, it's likely that the city will need to incentivize customers to choose Syracuse.

"We're doing our best to make Syr-  
Please turn to page 6

## Maryland Creates Task Force for Baltimore Convention Center

By Jonathan Trager

In what the Baltimore Convention Center says marks "a pivotal moment for the center," the Maryland Senate has established a Baltimore Convention and Tourism Redevelopment and Operating Organization Task Force.

Mac Campbell, Executive Director of the Baltimore Convention Center, spoke on the issue during National Travel and Tourism Week. Set to take effect on July 1, the legislation empowers a dedicated task force to thoroughly assess the venue's needs and produce a comprehensive analysis report essential for its ongoing operation, governance, and needed modernization. Legislators passed the bill earlier this year.

"Charged with reimagining the governance of the BCC, the task force will also develop bold strategies to amplify its economic impact through the modernization and expansion of usable space within the facility," said

Campbell. "We are thrilled that the General Assembly recognized this need and that Governor Moore is prioritizing a true Baltimore renaissance, positioning us prominently on the national stage."

This bill follows the allocation of \$25.7 million to the venue by the state and \$6.9 million by the city in 2023. Of that amount, \$20 million will be used for facility upgrades and stabilization, including enhancements to the HVAC, safety features, and new water treatment systems as well as client-facing systems such as exterior architectural lighting, pedestrian-walkway improvements and renovations to restrooms in exhibit halls.

The remaining \$5 million will fund research and a larger study to determine the necessary steps for the venue's renovation.

The task force will be staffed by the Maryland Department of Commerce. Detailed findings will be presented by December.

# USAE*Exchange*

## Conversation with Stuart Butler, Chief Marketing Officer, Visit Myrtle Beach

Stuart Butler has made his mark in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, by championing travel accessibility. Butler, who won the 2024 Champion Award from the Champion Autism Network and was recognized as a 2024 Accessibility Champion by TravelAbility, spoke with USAE about his efforts there and how other destination organizations can follow suit. More information may be found at [visitmyrtlebeach.com/plan/autism-friendly-vacations](https://visitmyrtlebeach.com/plan/autism-friendly-vacations).

**USAE:** Why do you think travel accessibility has become such an important focus in the industry?

**Butler:** I think people are recognizing the fact that everyone deserves to travel. There are a lot of barriers for certain groups of people to enjoy a “typical” vacation. As DMOs have shifted their mandate away from destination marketing organizations to destination stewardship or management organizations, they can open the aperture of their lens to look at the experience and not just the promotion. It’s long overdue, but it’s exciting that people are paying more attention to people who have challenges to traveling. We can say we at the DMO are in a position to tackle some of the challenges and make appropriate accommodations.

**USAE:** Can you tell me about Myrtle Beach and your travel accessibility work there?

**Butler:** Myrtle Beach welcomes 20 million people a year—it’s the most-visited coastal destination in the United States. About 10 years ago, we were fortunate enough to have Becky Large with Champion Autistic Network (CAN) move to our area with a child on the autism spectrum. We started developing pretty robust training programs for neurodiversity and how to recognize sensory challenges and accommodate them. Myrtle Beach became the first-ever certified sensory destination by CAN. We’ve trained thousands of frontline workers to provide a better experience for people with neurodiversity. A statistic I heard about three years ago when I joined is that 87% of families with a member on the autism spectrum don’t travel, and it broke my heart. We started “The Beach is for Everybody,” a campaign with a sensory-friendly pledge. We went to businesses and asked them to support the campaign and 60+ of them signed up. We did that with TravelAbility and CAN. From there, we really developed the experience so now we have sensory-friendly events and sensory-friendly hours.

We’re about to launch a children’s book by an author and illustrator, Lynda Farrington Wilson, who has a

child on the autism spectrum titled *Splish, Splash, Squawk! Finding Joy in a Sensory-Friendly Vacation*. It features a character called Maris the parrot and follows a series of children who are neurodiverse as they navigate a sensory vacation. We’re also doing a TV show that we’ve been working on for a year called “Traveling the Spectrum” that follows three families that traveled to Myrtle Beach last year and we documented their experience for a week. It’s the most powerful transformative project I’ve worked on in my career. It showed me not only that everyone deserves to travel but that it’s a disservice to individuals with disabilities and families if they don’t travel. They learn a lot about themselves and show growth; all had “eureka moments.” I think for the audience that’s going to watch the show it will bring more awareness to autism as a condition, but it’s also going to make everyone realize that we’re all more similar than we are different.

**USAE:** How did you feel to win the award from Champion Autism Network and to be recognized by TravelAbility?

**Butler:** It’s humbling. For me, it’s a recognition of the team’s work and energy that has gone in. I’m a front person for the organization when it comes to marketing but I see it as recognition of the hard work that dozens of people have put in over the last decade to make Myrtle Beach the most sensory-friendly destination in



the world.

**USAE:** What advice do you have for destinations that want to be more travel accessible?

**Butler:** One, you have to commit to it. You have to allocate the appropriate resources; you need one person whose responsibility is accessibility and you have to give them the resources needed. All disabilities are different with different dimensions, but even when you dig into to an area like mobility, with two individuals who have that disability, their lived experiences are not the same. So there isn’t a one-size-fits-all solution. With wheelchair

users, bed height is big deal, but some need it to be lower and some need it to be higher. If you’re going to take this seriously, go find local organizations and advocacy groups and work collaboratively with them to develop individualized solutions. At the end of the day, we’re not serving a disability, we’re serving individuals, so you can’t have a checkbox mentality; you have to develop a culture of inclusion. We have to be integrative with the communities that we’re serving, so that we can have a continuous dialogue and continue to improve—accessibility is never a finished thing.

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# NEWS

## U.S.–China Tourism Leadership Summit Looks to Spur Travel

By Todd McElwee

Brand USA, U.S. Department of Commerce and Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China joined together to facilitate the 14th U.S.–China Tourism Leadership Summit was held late last month.

The three-day event in Xi'an, China, was aimed at fostering the return of Chinese visitors to the United States and was taking place for the first time since 2019.

"The return of Chinese visitors is critical for the U.S. tourism industry and essential for the full recovery of our

**"The return of Chinese visitors is critical for the U.S. tourism industry and essential for the full recovery of our economy," said Chris Thompson, President & CEO, Brand USA.**

economy," said Chris Thompson, President & CEO, Brand USA. "The 14th U.S.–China Tourism Leadership Summit plays a crucial role in revitalizing this vital market segment."

Prior to the pandemic, China was a top-five market for visitors to the United States and the top source of international traveler spending. In 2019, nearly 80 million visitors to the U.S. spent about \$235 billion, with three million Chinese visitors contributing \$35 billion.

"Travel and tourism supports 9.5 million American jobs," said Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Industry and Analysis Grant T. Harris.

"The U.S.–China Tourism Leadership Summit provided an important opportunity to further the Department of Commerce's mission to enhance the international competitiveness of the U.S. travel and tourism industry. Through our participation, we hope to see more Chinese visitors experience the United States, which will support jobs and economic growth in communities across the country."

The U.S. delegation was led by Harris and Thompson. It included representation from Destination DC, Destination Niagara USA, Discover Puerto Rico, Guam Visitors Bureau, Hawaii Tourism Authority, Hilton Worldwide, International Inbound Travel Association, Los Angeles Tourism & Convention Board, Marriott International, Mastercard, New York City Tourism + Conventions, San Francisco Travel Association, Travel

Oregon, Travel South USA, U.S. Travel Association, Visa, Visit California, Visit San Diego, and Visit Seattle.

Todd Davidson, President & CEO, Travel Oregon, Chair, Brand USA said: "The 14th U.S.–China Tourism Leadership Summit marked a significant milestone in our efforts to strengthen the tourism bridge between our two nations. The insights and collaborations developed during this event were essential for fostering mutual understanding and economic growth. It is great to have restarted the summit and be back in this market after six years as we reunite with our colleagues from the Chinese government and travel industry."

The Chinese delegation was led by State Councilor Yiquin Shen, Chinese Minister of Culture and Tourism, Sun Yeli, and Shaanxi Party Secretary, Zhao Yide.

## STR, Six Hotel Companies Move to Dismiss Antitrust Lawsuit

By Jordan Bradley

STR, its parent company CoStar Group, and six major hotel companies on May 17 filed a joint motion to dismiss a class action antitrust lawsuit brought against the companies for alleged room rate inflation.

The suit was filed by seven residents of California, Florida, Illinois and other states in February seeking damages under U.S. antitrust law for people who rented rooms between February 21, 2020, and the present from Hilton, Hyatt Hotels, Loews Hotels, Marriott International, Accor or Six Continents Hotels.

The plaintiffs allege that the accused hotel companies shared competitively sensitive information through STR reports that detail "performance benchmarking and comparative analytics" throughout the hospitality industry.

In the motion to dismiss, STR and the other defendants refute the accusation.

"The Complaint is remised on the fanciful claim that STR's benchmarking reports are vehicles for improper information exchanges among competitors and 'price fixing in its modern form,'" the filing stated. "But the reality is that STR's reports have been around since the late 1980s, and have been described by courts as 'highly regarded and widely used,'...and 'an important publication if one wishes to obtain information about a hotel's performance...'"

In a May 22 emailed statement to *USAE*, an STR spokesperson said: "STR stands by its long-standing practice

of providing the hotel industry with competition-enhancing analysis. Since its founding in 1985, STR has been committed to providing the industry with the highest-quality insights, while simultaneously protecting the confidentiality of client data through aggregation and anonymization. STR will therefore vigorously defend itself in the lawsuit."

STR's motion to dismiss also said that plaintiffs' "attempt to mimic other recent lawsuits aimed at various forms of 'algorithmic pricing'" is off base given that reports from STR are not generated using algorithms and do not offer pricing recommendations.

"Instead, STR's reports only provide customers with benchmarks against occupancy and historical revenue data aggregated and averaged from typically at least five, and often many more, other hotels," the motion said.

STR went on to note that the complaint is "implausible and legally deficient" for four key reasons: it "fails at the outset because it does not answer 'basic questions' regarding the alleged conspiracy," such as the "who," "when," and "what" of the alleged conspiracy; it fails to provide evidence of an agreement between the defendant hotels; it is unable to provide direct evidence of anticompetitive effects; and the plaintiffs fail to present a "sufficient causal connection" between increased hotel room rates and "alleged conspiracy to exchange competitively sensitive information through STR."

STR and the six hotel defendants are requesting that the court dismiss the suit with prejudice.

## Syracuse

*continued from page 4*

acuse as attractive as possible. But at the end of the day, if it comes down to dollars and cents, we're gonna have to put that money up—and that comes from the rest of the county – to bring business into the city. So the whole the whole equation is problematic," Leidka said.

When Leidka joined Visit Syracuse seven years ago, he told *USAE*, the destination lagged behind other large

cities in the state, excluding New York City, by 6-10% in occupancy and RevPAR rates. But the last two years have been a different story.

"We have so much momentum right now," Leidka said. "The last two years have been historic years in our county for tourism and our convention business as well. So all that momentum that we had, where we're on par with our competitors now. Now we've got to find a way to solve this issue. So I just hope we don't lose the momentum."

## NYC Hotels

*continued from page 2*

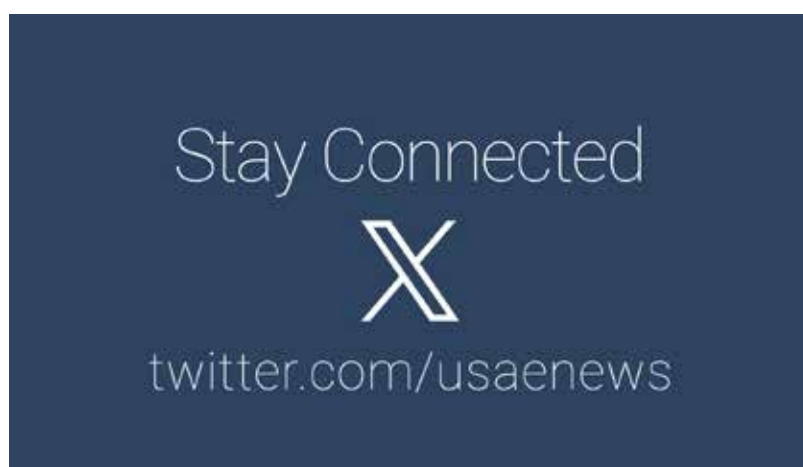
hotel in Manhattan that shuttered during the pandemic."

The contract for the Sanctuary Hotel Program is set to expire on August 31, and Dandapani said he expects HANYC to renew the contract at that time.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Dandapani noted that as the situation with migrants and asylum

seekers changes, it's possible that the financial commitment from the city could decrease.

When asked by *USAE* about feedback from HANYC member hotels that have chosen to participate in the program, Dandapani said: "Each hotel makes its own decision and quite a few companies have hotels that are in the transient business as well as in the migrant business. Each company makes its own decision and respects those of others regardless of their choices."



# THE FINAL WORD

## Embracing Pride by Fostering Inclusion and Belonging in the Meetings Industry

By Kyle Jordan, CAE, CEM-AP, CMP, DES, CMM, Chair, LGBT Meeting Professionals Association, and Director of Meetings, The Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences (INFORMS)

The mission of the LGBT Meeting Professionals Association is to connect, empower, and advance the events community through LGBT+ advocacy, education, research, idea exchange, and networking. As we step into the month of Pride (June), we find ourselves celebrating, reflecting, and recommitting to acceptance, equality, and belonging, core values that define everything we do. Pride's significance extends beyond the parades and festivities; it serves as a powerful reminder of the progress we've made and the work still ahead in building a truly inclusive world.

Inclusion and belonging are essential to creating environments where diverse voices are heard, respected, and valued. As meetings professionals, we must ensure that our participants feel seen and appreciated for who they are and what they bring to our events.

**Inclusion and belonging are essential to creating environments where diverse voices are heard, respected, and valued.**

We have a unique opportunity—and responsibility—to foster spaces that celebrate diversity in all its forms.

To achieve this, we need to understand our participants' unique needs and ensure our events are accessible to everyone. This might mean providing gender-neutral restrooms, ensuring venues are accessible to those with disabilities, using inclusive language in our communications, or creating spaces for LGBTQIA2+ participants.

Queer spaces—safe, affirming environments where LGBTQIA2+ individuals can express their identities without fear—are more critical than ever at events. These spaces allow authenticity to be celebrated and connections to be made based on shared experiences. They can take many forms, from dedicated networking events to LGBTQ+ affinity groups within larger conferences. By creating these spaces, we affirm our commitment to supporting and elevating our LGBTQIA2+ participants.

When participants see that our events are inclusive and welcoming, it sends a powerful message that everyone belongs. It is not about making a political statement; it's about ensuring that every person feels respected and

valued.

Our meetings are where ideas are exchanged, relationships are built, and innovations are sparked. Designing them with inclusion at their core unlocks a wealth of potential. Diverse perspectives lead to richer discussions, more creative solutions, and better outcomes for our participants, industries, and the world. Inclusion is not just the right thing to do; it's a strategic advantage.

Our commitment to inclusion and belonging should be evident in every aspect of our work—from selecting destinations and the initial planning stages to on-site execution and follow-up. It involves continuous learning, listening, and adapting to meet the evolving needs of our diverse communities. It also means celebrating our successes and acknowledging areas where we can improve.

There is always more to be done, more voices to uplift, and more



spaces to create. The LGBT Meeting Professionals Association hopes you will join us in using this Pride month as a catalyst for continued progress, reaffirming our vision and dedication to creating a global events community where all are accepted, equal, and belong.

*Happy Pride!*

## Around Associations

By Todd McElwee

**Exhibitions & Conferences Alliance Welcomes ICCA as Newest Alliance Partner...** Last month, the Exhibitions & Conferences Alliance (ECA) announced the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) has joined ECA as its newest alliance partner.

"Whether its supporting smart decarbonization and sustainability measures or advancing policies that help advance seamless international travel and commerce, our advocacy efforts are stronger when industry leaders from around the world speak to policymakers with one voice," said Hervé Sedky, Emerald Holding President & CEO and Chair of ECA. "That's why I'm thrilled to welcome ICCA and its global community of international association meetings leaders to ECA, which will strengthen ECA's ability to tell the story of how our industry drives

economic growth and societal change to the policymakers that matter."

ECA will provide ICCA with an opportunity to advocate for its members in North America and to join a group of like-minded organizations working toward the advancement of the industry's collective business and sustainability objectives.

"ICCA is thrilled to partner with ECA and move forward together toward the shared objectives of advocating for our industry in North America," said Senthil Gopinath, ICCA's CEO. "This partnership promises to provide mutual support and resources to advance the goals of serving our respective members, promoting sustainability, and building a legacy that reflects our mission, vision, and values."

ICCA joins ECA's coalition of alliance partners who represent the interconnected ecosystem of exhibitors, event and meeting organizers, suppliers, venues, and hard-working men and women that comprise the U.S. and

global business events landscape.

- Experiential Designers & Producers Association (EDPA)
- Exhibition Services & Contractors Association (ESCA)
- International Association of Exhibitions and Events (IAEE)
- International Association of Venue Managers (IAVM)
- International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA)
- Professional Convention Management Association (PCMA)
- Society of Independent Show Organizers (SISO)
- Trade Show Labor Alliance
- UFI, The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry

ICCA will be represented on the ECA board of directors by Gopinath.

**Great American Beer Festival Coemption Registration Opens June 11...** Registration for the competition portion of the Brewers Association's Great American Beer Festival (GABF) will open June 11. The event is October 10–12 at Denver's Colorado Conven-

tion Center.

Find more information at [greatamericanbeerfestival.com](http://greatamericanbeerfestival.com). **SITE Past President Annamaria Ruffini Honored by Italian Senate...** SITE sent warm wishes and a heartfelt congratulation to its 2018 President, Annamaria Ruffini, who was honored recently by the Italian Senate with the Women Who Won award. Annamaria Ruffini, founder and President of the Rome-based Events In & Out agency was President of SITE Italy. She received SITE's Jane E. Schuldt Master Motivator Award in 2011 for maintaining "the highest standard of excellence in creating or executing motivational events."

On the initiative of Senator Daniela Scrollini, and in collaboration with the industry webmagazine *Quality Travel*, Ruffini and six other women professionals, were recognized for their contribution to tourism in Italy during a special ceremony at Palazzo Giustiniani in Rome.



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