



Visit Indy hosted its annual State of Tourism event at the Indiana Convention Center on February 5. The organization announced record-setting tourism results for 2024, shared news that Indy will host the American Society of Plastic Surgeons in 2033, and honored the WNBA's Indiana Fever with its highest tourism award, the Bill McGowan Leadership Award. Left to right: Olympic gold medalist Tamika Catchings, Indiana Fever; Indianapolis Mayor Joe Hogsett; Natasha Howard, Indiana Fever; Mel Raines, Indiana Pacers; Michael Browning, Visit Indy; Lynn Dunn, Indiana Fever; Kelly Krauskopf, Indiana Fever; Amber Cox, Indiana Fever; Caitlin Clark, Indiana Fever; Leonard Hoops, Visit Indy; Bill McGowan's son Tom McGowan, Kite Reality Group; and Chris Gahl, Visit Indy. Credit: Rob Banayote

President-Elect of Biology Teachers Assn. Dies in D.C. Plane Crash *Air Tragedy Reverberates Through Association Community*

By Todd McElwee

Lindsey Denae Fields, President-Elect of the National Association of Biology Teachers (NABT), died while aboard American Airlines Flight 5342, which collided with a helicopter in Washington, D.C., on January 29. She was 40.

Fields was a biology professor and department chair at Butler Community College in El Dorado, Kansas. NABT said she was traveling to represent its community and advocate for "excellence in life science education."

A bio provided by Butler showed Fields became a member of NABT in 2007 as an undergraduate student. She presented at the national conference multiple times and regularly attended for professional development and networking. In addition to board service, she held a variety of volunteer posts within NABT.

"This is a tremendous loss," NABT

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FBI Agents Association Shares Concerns over Members' Careers

By Todd McElwee

In a letter to congressional leaders on February 3, the FBI Agents Association (FBIAA) shared "urgent concerns" that actions taken recently by acting officials at the Department of Justice (DOJ) threaten the careers of thousands of FBI special agents and could disrupt the bureau's essential work.

The correspondence notes the FBI has been ordered to compile lists of all current and former personnel who worked on investigations related to January 6, 2021, and a Hamas-related case. The lists are set to be used to determine whether those individuals should face additional personnel actions.

"We urge you to work with President Trump to prevent acting officials

from taking personnel actions that undermine our shared goal of keeping the FBI out of politics," the letter said. "It is imperative that FBI Special Agents can continue their critical work, free from fear of retaliation, and focused on safeguarding our nation."

FBIAA represents more than 14,000 active and retired FBI special agents. The association said

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Omni Approved for New Orleans Convention Center Hotel

By Jordan Bradley

Omni Hotels and Resorts has been approved to develop a 1,000-room headquarters hotel at the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. The hotel is anticipated to open in 2029.

The convention center's governing body, the Ernest N. Morial New Orleans Exhibition Hall Authority (NOEHA), announced its approval of the Omni hotel development and ground lease agreement on January 30, saying that it expected the hotel to be "transfor-

mative for the city, region and state."

"Today's votes showcase the power of thoughtful development—how it can drive our state's hospitality and tourism industry forward and benefit the local community at the same time," said Russ Allen, President of NOEHA. "Omni is the best partner to bring this project to fruition and finally give New Orleans the new, dedicated headquarters hotel it needs."

The Omni New Orleans, as the headquarters hotel will be called, is a new-

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Al Hutchinson Stepping Down as Leader of Visit Baltimore

By Jonathan Trager

Al Hutchinson, President & CEO of Visit Baltimore, has decided not to renew his contract with the organization when it expires on June 30, Visit Baltimore has announced.

The 65-year-old Hutchinson, who took the helm of the organization in 2016, called serving in his current position "the opportunity of a lifetime."

"It has been the most challenging job that I've ever had and also the most fulfilling," said Hutchinson. "After careful consider-

ation, I've decided to step back from full-time executive leadership to focus on other personal interests and opportunities once my existing contract concludes. Baltimore's potential as a premier destination continues to flourish, and the foundation we've built over the past several years ensures that our city's tourism industry will continue to thrive."

A committee made up of several members of the Baltimore Convention & Tourism Board led by Chair Charles "Chuck" Tildon III

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NEWS

MGM Agrees to Pay \$45M in Data Breach Lawsuit Settlement

By Jordan Bradley

The United States District Court in Nevada gave preliminary approval of a \$45 million settlement in a combined class action lawsuit holding MGM Resorts International to account for two separate data breaches in 2019 and 2023.

Per the settlement agreement, “tens of millions of Defendant’s customers’ private information” was accessed during the breaches, with plaintiffs alleging that MGM failed to enact proper cybersecurity protocols. The final approval hearing for the settlement is set for June 18.

The first of the data breaches occurred in July 2019, when hackers stole the private information of approximately 37 million MGM guests and customers, according to the settlement.

For the majority of the victims, hackers accessed names, home and email addresses, phone numbers and/or their dates of birth.

The second breach—which began on September 7, 2023, but was not detected until three days later, according to the *Wall Street Journal*—was a ransomware attack that disabled MGM’s key systems for several days.

During the attack, hackers accessed customers’ and guests’ names, home and email addresses, telephone numbers, dates of birth, driver’s licenses and passport numbers, military I.D. numbers, and in some cases, Social

Security numbers.

During the second attack, MGM’s systems were shut down, including key card access to hotel rooms, slot machines and online bookings, for several days, which cost the company approximately \$100 million. In an October 2023 filing with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, MGM said it expects the cost to be covered by insurance.

During the second cybersecurity breach, the settlement agreement notes that “unauthorized individuals accessed [MGM’s] network by impersonating an information technology administrator and gaining access to employees’ network access credentials...Once inside the network, the unauthorized individuals locked down [MGM’s] network and further gained access” to customer data.

Hackers demanded a multimillion-dollar payment to release MGM’s systems and leave customer data alone. Following Federal Bureau of Investigation advisement, MGM did not pay the ransom.

Per the settlement agreement, impacted consumers will be able to submit claims in three tiers depending on what data was extracted during the hacks.

MGM customers and guests whose Social Security number or military ID numbers were compromised fall under Tier 1 and are eligible for a \$75 cash payment, according to the settlement; those whose driver’s license numbers



MGM Resorts International agreed to a \$45 million settlement in a combined class-action lawsuit brought against the company for data breaches in 2019 and 2023.

were compromised who were not also in Tier 1 fall under Tier 2 and are eligible for a \$50 payment; and those whose names, postal addresses and dates of birth were compromised fall under Tier 3 and are eligible for a \$20 payment.

All settlement class members may receive identity theft protection and theft monitoring as well.

Last January, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) issued a civil investigative demand, a type of administrative subpoena that allows the federal government to request information from private entities without formal court proceedings, to further investigate MGM’s handling of the September

2023 attack.

MGM countered with a lawsuit in April 2024, looking to remove then-FTC Chair Lina Khan—who resigned this January—from the case given that she was a guest at an MGM property during the September 2023 cyberattack, according to the *WSJ*.

The FTC filed a motion to dismiss MGM’s lawsuit last June, which the casino-hotel operator opposed two months later. The FTC and MGM have since continued to file procedural motions, according to the *WSJ*.

Representatives from MGM did not respond to *USAE* request for comment by deadline.

ASAE Research Foundation Announces AMC Leaders Scholarship

By Todd McElwee

The ASAE Research Foundation has launched a new initiative aimed at supporting association professionals working within association management companies (AMCs).

Made possible via a donation from ASAE Immediate Past Chair Lynda Bouchard Patterson, FASAE, CAE, Founder and CEO of AMPED Association Management and Founder of Association CEO, the AMC Leaders Scholarship was instituted to meet the unique needs of AMCs while fostering meaningful connections and professional development opportunities through ASAE.

Patterson approached the ASAE Research Foundation with the vision of developing a scholarship program to directly impact the AMC community.

“I started this scholarship fund because I believe in the power of strong leadership within AMCs,” Patterson

said. “AMCs provide essential expertise to elevate associations, yet many professionals are unaware of AMCs as a dynamic and rewarding career path. Through the ASAE Research Foundation, this scholarship will help develop leaders who will enhance the connection between AMCs and associations, driving greater impact across industries and communities.”

Three AMC professionals will be selected annually to receive the scholarship, which provides funding of \$3,000 per recipient to support attendance at ASAE in-person events. Money can be applied toward registration, travel, lodging or other associated expenses.

In addition, recipients will receive exclusive opportunities for association community connections, educational experiences and one-on-one coaching sessions. For those who are not yet ASAE members, complimentary membership will be included.

“Lynda’s unwavering support and

dedication to the association and AMC community will have a profound and lasting impact,” said Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE, President & CEO, ASAE. “Her visionary leadership and generous contribution will not only elevate awareness and interest in AMCs but also strengthen their role within the broader association ecosystem. By fostering deeper connections and expanding opportunities, Lynda is helping to ensure the long-term growth, sustainability, and success of AMCs for years to come.”

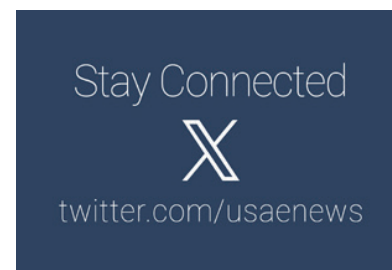
ASAE said AMCs are a vital part of the association community, representing a growing segment of ASAE’s membership. It added they offer both full-service association management and specialized services, which support associations in unique and impactful ways and provide a valuable career pathway for professionals at all stages of their sector careers.

ASAE thanked the founding cor-

porate donors to the AMC Leaders Scholarship: Association Management Center (AMC); Associated Luxury Hotels International (ALHI); AMPED Association Management; Atlanta CVB; Bostrom; Degnon Associates, Inc.; MCI USA; Stringfellow Management Group (SMG); and Talley Management Group.

The ASAE Research Foundation will host a reception for the Foundation donor community on March 27 to officially launch the AMC Leaders Scholarship.

More information can be found at foundation.asaecenter.org.



HOTS

HOTS Seal Sleepover... A woman staying at Pier 7, a hotel in Vlissingen on the beach in the Netherlands, encountered an unexpected guest, CBS News reported. When the hotel guest returned from a stroll around the city with her pooch, the pair found a seal napping on the hotel room floor. According to a local news outlet, the woman accidentally left the door of her beachfront hotel room open when she left, allowing the sea mammal to enter. Upon discovery of the seal, the woman called the hotel who called the Sea Animal Rescue Team, an

animal welfare organization, to come out and encourage the seal to find another place to nap. "We often get strange messages and aren't surprised so quickly, but when we received a message tonight we couldn't believe it at first," the Sea Animal Rescue Team shared on their social media. According to the organization, the seal was "completely relaxed" in the hotel room when it was disturbed by the guest and her dog and became "quite grumpy" as a result of the disturbance. In the end, the rescue team was able to move the seal without injury or further incident. HOTS thinks that's one way to have a seal-iously memorable vacation.



HOTS Egg Heist... Thieves stole 100,000 eggs from the back of a trailer in Pennsylvania on February 1, and Pennsylvania State Police have been unable to cage the culprit, AP reported. According to Trooper First Class Megan Frazer, a spokesperson with the Pennsylvania State Police, the theft is tied to the startlingly high cost of eggs, but no leads on who stole the eggs has come in. Police are currently following up with possible witnesses and looking into surveillance footage nearby in the



On Instagram, Explore Louisiana and Louisiana State Museums shared a video of the St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans being illuminated for the Super Bowl LIX, February 9 at Caesars Superdome.

hopes of identifying the thieves. "In my career, I've never heard of a hundred thousand eggs being stolen," said Frazer, who has a dozen years on the

job. "This is definitely unique." HOTS wonders how long it took the thieves to cook up this heist or if it was a crime of opportunity?

WEEKLY NEWS OF ASSOCIATIONS, CLUBS AND HOTELS

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Destinations International Announces 2024 Tourism Sentiment Report

By Jonathan Trager

Destinations International (DI) in collaboration with Longwoods International on February 6 announced the release of the United States Industry Brief: 2024 National Resident Sentiment.

The report highlights how Americans feel about tourism's impact on their local economies, employment, quality of life, and environmental sustainability. These findings are critical for U.S. destination marketing organizations, DI states.

"As destination organizations, we have an important responsibility to engage residents in meaningful ways, share our tourism development plans and ensure that we are building tourism strategies that benefit both visitors and the communities we serve," said Don Welsh, President & CEO of DI. "The tourism industry is a vital driver of the U.S. economy, and

this study provides key insights to help ensure its continued growth in a way that is both sustainable and beneficial to local communities."

The new study shows that the perception among Americans that tourism is good for their community increased from 57% in 2020 to 64% in 2024. However, the study also underscores the importance of addressing community concerns related to overcrowding, cost of living, and environmental sustainability.

To enhance community engagement, DI recommends the following strategies:

- Highlight Destination Stewardship Efforts: The study emphasizes the importance of communicating destination stewardship initiatives that balance tourism growth with residents' quality of life.
- Promote Sustainable Tourism: There is strong public support for environmental education, with more than two-thirds (68%) of Americans

agreeing that tourists should be educated on responsible travel.

- Share Career Stories: The study reveals that there is a significant opportunity to educate residents about the diverse career opportunities available within the tourism industry, from entry-level jobs to long-term careers with competitive pay and benefits.

"Americans are increasingly supportive of tourism and the positive contributions it brings to their communities," said Amir Eylon, President & CEO of Longwoods International. "However, this research also highlights areas where further efforts can be made, particularly in keeping residents informed about the economic benefits of tourism, strengthening messaging about sustainability, and actively promoting career opportunities in the tourism industry."

More information and the full study is available at destinationsinternational.org.

NO Omni

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build hotel that will be located across Convention Center Boulevard at the current Sugar Mill event venue site.

In a January 31 release announcing the approval, Omni said the designing of the hotel will continue throughout 2025. Plans for the Omni New Orleans

include 100,000 square feet of meeting space, several restaurants and bars, a rooftop pool deck, a destination spa, a parking garage and an upgrade of the adjacent Mississippi River Heritage Park.

Omni President Kurt Alexander called the approval for the project "an exciting moment," adding that the Omni New Orleans "will be a fitting addition to the cityscape that under-

scores the unique hospitality you can only find in this city."

Construction is expected to start in 2026. Omni and NOEHA have been in discussions about a convention center hotel since 2018.

The Omni New Orleans will be the second Omni hotel in the city, following the historic Omni Royal Orleans, which Omni has operated for decades, but only recently acquired the building in 2021.

NEWS

Resorts World NYC Unveils \$5B Redevelopment Plan

By Jordan Bradley

Resorts World New York City held a ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate the unveiling of its new Experience Center on January 23, which details the Queens property's \$5 billion redevelopment plan should it be awarded one of three casino licenses by the state of New York later this year.

The Experience Center, located in the Resorts World NYC grand lobby, features 3D models and video walls that detail the proposed changes to the property. These include the 350,000 square feet of meeting, conference and entertainment spaces such as a 7,000-seat entertainment venue; approximately 30 new food and beverage options, and an additional 1,600 hotel guest rooms.

"Today marks a big step closer to realizing the potential of Southeast Queens and the entire borough as we open the doors to the Resorts World New York City Experience Center," said Robert DeSalvio, President of Genting Americas East, Resorts World's parent company. "For over a decade, we've been proud to grow alongside the Southeast Queens community. Now, this portal into the future will cement Queens' status as a global

destination when our community sees a world-class entertainment venue, new meeting and conference space, and acres of additional greenspace come to life."

Area residents were invited to tour the center, and the ceremony was attended by local stakeholders, state senators, and company representatives, Resorts World said.

"Resorts World stands ready to deliver on a promise of historic investment in the Aqueduct site," said state Sen. Joe Addabbo Jr. "Now, New Yorkers will be able to physically see how real, impactful, and transformative this project is. This isn't a pipe dream—it's a tangible development that will make a positive impact. Let's not put it off any longer."

Resorts World NYC opened in October 2011, celebrating its 13th anniversary last year.

Betty Braton, Chair of the Queens Community Board 10 and ceremony attendee, said: "Resorts World has been a tremendous community partner since they first came into our community more than 13 years ago. They've stood by us, offering opportunity, assistance and support to local residents and small businesses in good times and bad. With the unveiling of



Resorts World New York City in Queens, New York, held a ribbon-cutting ceremony hosted by Robert DeSalvio (center, with scissors), President of Genting Americas East, the property's parent company, for its new Experience Center on January 23.

the Experience Center, we're getting a better glimpse at how this partnership will flourish in the years to come."

The city's only casino-hotel, Resorts World NYC is part of the Aqueduct Racetrack complex. As part of its redevelopment plan should it receive a full gaming license, Genting Group said it has a "transformative vision" for a parcel of land nearby: Aqueduct Park.

The parcel's development would include the construction of 3,000 homes, approximately 50 acres of new green space, and "transportation improvements" to JFK International Airport, Resorts World said.

The New York Gaming Facility Location Board is expected to award the three licenses by December 1, and bids are due by June 27.

Hutchinson

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has been established to help ensure a smooth transition. Hutchinson has agreed to stay on in a consultant role to assist with the transition at least until his successor is identified.

Visit Baltimore noted that achievements during Hutchinson's tenure include posting record-breaking visitation of 27.5 million visitors in 2023; winning a bid to host the 2033 American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) Annual Meeting and Exposition; establishing a Tourism Improvement District, which provides additional resources directly from city hotels toward sales and marketing efforts; leading a full marketing rebrand

and launching the mobile visitor center "Smalltimore"; fostering a number of initiatives built on social inclusion; and securing Baltimore as the host city for the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA) Men's and Women's Basketball Tournament.

"Al's vision and dedication have been instrumental in elevating Baltimore's profile on the national stage," said Tildon. "Under his leadership, we've seen Baltimore transform into a destination that not only attracts significant leisure visitation but also draws marquee conventions and events that drive critical economic impact for the city. His most enduring legacy is the world-class team he has built and the collaborative culture he has fostered within the organi-

zation."

In addition, under Hutchinson's leadership the organization "has strengthened community partnerships by highlighting local artists and makers while celebrating local visionaries who have enhanced the city's cultural landscape and tourist appeal," Visit Baltimore stated.

"Under Al's transformative leadership, Baltimore's tourism industry has thrived, bringing visitors, investment, and new opportunities to our city," said Baltimore Mayor Brandon M. Scott. "We are grateful for Al's many contributions to Baltimore. His commitment to telling positive, community-focused stories that showcase the breadth and diversity of our neighborhoods has set the stage for a bright future."



Al Hutchinson

CVB Update

Visit St. Pete-Clearwater on February 4 announced The MICHELIN Guide will be expanding its selection in Florida with three new destinations being added in 2025, including St. Pete-Clearwater.

The inclusion of St. Pete-Clearwater as a destination partner of the MICHELIN Guide Florida 2025 provides another level of attention to

the destination – home of America's Favorite Beaches – and provides a spotlight on the wide range of dining options from local fish shacks to fine dining, according to the organization.

"We are ecstatic to have been sought out and invited to be a part of the Florida MICHELIN Guide for the caliber of restaurants and culinary experiences you can find

in St. Pete-Clearwater," said Brian Lowack, President & CEO of Visit St. Pete-Clearwater. "This inclusion now gives us the chance to show off our award-winning beaches and award-worthy culinary experiences as we set out to change the perception of what beach cuisine can be. With this new designation, St. Pete-Clearwater will reach a new audience of food-

focused travelers who are in search of an extraordinary culinary experience & America's Favorite Beaches in one incredible destination."

The MICHELIN Guide's anonymous Inspectors are already in the field, making dining reservations and scouting for culinary gems in the new territories. The full 2025 restaurant

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NEWS

Ritz-Carlton, Marina del Rey Accommodates Wedding During Wildfire

By Jordan Bradley

When Jessica Lange, the Catering Sales Manager at the Ritz-Carlton, Marina del Rey in California answered her office phone on January 8, she was prepared for whatever was waiting for her on the other end.

On this day, the call came from the friend of a bride whose January 10 wedding venue, the Bel-Air Bay Club, had canceled their nuptials due to the Palisades wildfires and ensuing evacuation orders. (The club was not damaged in the wildfires.) The bride, Kendyl Klein, and groom, Ben DiGuilio, live in New Jersey and were unable to move their wedding date. They needed a venue—and they needed it fast.

“In this case, we had to put a special sense of urgency because—of course—they’re very stressed, and I wanted to let them know: ‘Just tell me what you need. We can get it done,’” Lange said.

For Lange and her staff at the hotel, which is set along the waterfront in Los Angeles, handling last-minute requests for guests is a normal occurrence, she told *USAE*.

“They weren’t going to cancel, but they were also sensitive to how their guests were going to feel.”

“It’s fun for us to figure out,” she said. “How are we going to make this work while at the same time being empathetic?”

Over the next two days, Lange discerned what Klein and DiGuilio, had arranged for their wedding with the original venue. Then she worked with her “small but mighty” catering staff to figure out what they could recreate within the party’s fiscal and temporal budgets, she said.

“We didn’t shovel out thousands of dollars to save the day,” Klein said in an interview with the *New York Times*. “The Ritz saved the day, recreating our whole original menu, going above and beyond to make our wedding perfect. This venue will forever hold a special place in our hearts.”

With wildfires raging throughout the city, and with about 50 of their guests unable to attend as a result,

the bride and groom were concerned about being respectful of the circumstances during their celebration.

“They weren’t going to cancel, but they were also sensitive to how their guests



The Ritz-Carlton, Marina del Rey hosted a pop-up wedding when a New Jersey bride and groom’s wedding plans were canceled due to the Palisade wildfires. Photo by: Don Riddle.

were going to feel,” Lange said. “How do we make this still a beautiful, intimate celebration, while also being sensitive to everyone around it? So it was just choosing the right location in our hotel.”

For Lange, the Klein/DiGiulio pop-up wedding was a standard happening for the hotel. But one of the most memorable aspects of the event was meeting Klein, DiGuilio and their families, she said.

“I went out to the lobby with some balloons and some champagne to welcome them, show them how excited we are, and to meet them in person after doing all this stuff over the phone—you can just sense how stressed they are,” Lange said. “And then when they arrive here, meeting them in person, giving them a hug, seeing how happy and excited they are—it’s a special feeling.”

Valentine’s Day Spending to Top \$27 Billion

By Todd McElwee

America is sweet on Valentine’s Day.

A survey by the National Retail Federation (NRF) and Prosper Insights & Analytics showed Americans are expected to spend a record \$27.5 billion on Valentine’s Day in 2025—up from last year’s \$25.8 billion.

New data from the National Confectioners Association (NCA) said 91% of Americans will enjoy chocolate and/or candy this holiday.

NRF and Prosper Insights & Analytics’ research showed shoppers plan to spend \$188.81 on average, three dollars more than last year. The previous record total was 2020’s \$27.4 billion.

“Whether they are celebrating a significant other or someone else in their lives, Valentine’s Day is meaningful for many people,” NRF Vice President of Industry and Consumer Insights Katherine Cullen said. “Con-

sumers are looking for special ways to treat their loved ones and can expect retailers to provide the best gift options and deals.”

Coming in at 56%, candy was the number one gift category, though it came in fourth in total spend at \$2.5 billion, NRF said.

NCA noted 75% of those in its survey said a heart-shaped box of chocolates is the most classic Valentine’s Day treat. When selecting their piece, 43% consult the guide, 24% bite into a corner, and 23% randomly select one to devour. Caramel, chocolate-covered nuts, chocolate center are the most hoped-for fillings.

“There is no pair more perfect than Valentine’s Day and candy,” said John Downs, President & CEO, NCA. “Year after year, people across the country turn to chocolate and candy to show their affection for others, creating lasting memories and spreading joy through simple, heartfelt gestures.”



Marriott Bonvoy and Courtyard by Marriott held a Jason Kelce (front center), Marriott International’s first-ever Fanbassador, lookalike contest to celebrate Super Bowl LIX held February 9 in New Orleans. Five duos were challenged by Marriott to “Find the Real Jason Kelce in a sea of Kelce lookalikes” throughout the French Quarter ahead of the game. The winning duo, Maris and Donovan of Texas, will spend a night in Marriott’s Courtyard Super Bowl Sleepover Suite, a suite converted into an overnight haven in Caesars Stadium the night before the Super Bowl. Attendees of the annual sports phenomenon were also treated to wandering Kelce lookalikes at the stadium throughout the game.

Flowers (40%), greeting cards (40%), an evening out (35%) and jewelry (22%) rounded out the top five gift segments. Americans plan

to spend a total of \$6.5 billion on jewelry, \$5.4 billion on an evening out, \$2.9 billion on flowers, and \$1.4 billion on greeting cards, respectively.

NEWS

HSMAI Recognizes Chapter Leadership at Mike Leven Leadership Conference

By Jordan Bradley

The Hospitality Sales and Marketing International Association (HSMAI) hosted its annual Mike Leven Leadership Conference on January 29–30 at the Hotel Landy in Orlando.

The conference hosted HSMAI chapter leaders throughout the Americas for a “mix of keynote speakers, collaborative working sessions and roundtable discussions,” the association said. Conference attendees included chapter presidents, managing directors, volunteer leaders, and board members.

This year’s conference speakers included Lee Cockerell, a former executive vice president of operations for the Walt Disney World Resort; Lovell Casiero, sr. vice president of commercial strategy at PM Hotel Group; and Summer Jelinek, an expert on leadership.

As part of the conference, HSMAI recognized chapters for their efforts

to further their chapters over the previous year in five categories: communication, membership, partnership, special events, and education.

The HSMAI Chapter Award Program, is called the Frank W. Berkman Best of the Best, in honor of Frank W. Berkman, who served as HSMAI’s executive director in the 1960s through 1981, the association said.

This year’s 2024 Frank W. Berkman Best of the Best winners are:

- Communication—Small Chapter: Puerto Rico; Medium Chapter: Arizona; Large Chapter: Greater New York
- Membership—Small Chapter: Ontario; Medium Chapter: Central Florida & Greater Denver; Large Chapter: South Florida & Washington, D.C.
- Partnership—Small Chapter: British Columbia; Medium Chapter: Arizona; Large Chapter: Greater New York
- Special Events—Small Chapter: Mid-South & Austin; Medium Chapter: Hawaii & Central Florida; Large Chapter: Greater New York



The Washington, D.C., Chapter of the Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International (HSMAI) was recognized for its efforts increasing its membership in 2024 at the association’s annual HSMAI Mike Leven Leadership Conference held at the Hotel Landy in Orlando on January 29–30.

- Education—Small Chapter: Ontario; Medium Chapter: Central Florida; Large Chapter: Las Vegas & Greater New York

Society of American Florists Fights Back Against Negative Advertising

By Todd McElwee

Fever, a global live entertainment platform peddling candlelight concerts, has drawn the attention of the Society of American Florists (SAF) with its social media ad stating: “Forget flowers this 14th February. What they really want is an experience.”

SAF is requesting Fever reconsider its marketing without disparaging flowers and is counting on members to help it stay informed of other similar offenses.

Elizabeth Daly, Director of Mar-

keting & Communications, SAF, told *USAE* on February 5 that Fever had not responded to the organization’s communications. Fever did not reply to *USAE*’s request for comment.

SAF said the ad appeared on Facebook and Instagram. The campaign also included videos showing roses with the text: “This Valentine’s Day, candlelit concerts will outshine any bouquet.”

The floral industry often finds itself in the advertising crosshairs during runups to major sector holidays such

as Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day. In 2024, SAF put financial tech company Klarna, photo retailer Shutterstock and four other companies on notice for their Valentine’s Day ads bashing flowers, warning them not to make the same mistake again this year.

Daly said members of the floral community can complement SAF’s efforts by reaching out directly to publications or businesses and communicating the impact this type of advertising can have on their businesses.

“In your response, be objective, diplomatic, and reasonable,” she advised. “Describe why you find the article or advertisement offensive or unfair. Urge the media outlet or advertiser to refrain from disparaging flowers and urge them to promote products based on their own merits.”

The “Counteracting Negative Publicity” portion of SAF’s website contains various resources for members to combat disparaging advertising of flowers.

FBI Letter

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on January 31, the acting deputy attorney general instructed the acting FBI director to terminate the FBI’s entire senior leadership team and the assistant director in charge of the Washington Field Office. It went on to note these actions are inconsistent with commitments made by the president, and his chosen leaders of the DOJ and the FBI to guide the bureau in a non-political manner that prioritizes national security and supports ethical law enforcement officers.

AP reported Democrats on the Senate Judiciary Committee wrote to Trump’s picks to run the FBI and Justice Department—Kash Patel and Pam Bondi, respectively—to express “grave concerns” about moves to scrutinize, reassign and remove ca-

reer officials and to demand a raft of internal communications about their plans to shake up the agencies.

FBIAA also stressed it is committed to working with new leadership at the DOJ and the FBI to uphold the bureau’s mission and ensure accountability among its personnel.

“Put simply, Special Agents who risk their lives protecting this country from criminals and terrorists are now being placed on lists and having their careers jeopardized for carrying out the orders they were given by their superiors in the FBI,” the letter said “These actions, which lack transparency and due process, are creating dangerous distractions, imperiling ongoing investigations, and undermining the Bureau’s ability to work with state, local, and international partners to make America safe again.”

Find the complete letter at fbiaa.org.



William Pate, President & CEO of the Atlanta CVB, was named one of the 100 Most Influential Georgians for 2025 by *Georgia Trend*. Pate’s selection underscores his contributions to Atlanta’s hospitality and tourism industry. A celebration of honorees took place on January 29 at the Georgia Aquarium. Pictured here is Pate (left) with Ben Young, Editor and Publisher of *Georgia Trend*.

NEWS

Around Associations

U.S. Travel Applauds Confirmation of Doug Burgum as Secretary of the Interior...

Geoff Freeman, President & CEO, U.S. Travel Association, issued the following statement on the Senate's confirmation of North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum to lead the Department of the Interior:

"Doug Burgum is the kind of strong, results-driven leader we need to oversee our nation's most iconic public lands—our national parks—which remain a source of deep pride and a key driver of visitation from travelers, domestically and abroad. Under Secretary Burgum's leadership, and as we look ahead to celebrations of the 250th anniversary of our great nation, we can continue to build on the success of these destinations and strengthen their role in our economy. We look forward to working with Secretary Burgum and applaud his confirmation to this crucial role."

Applications and Sponsorships Open for ISSA Scholars...

ISSA Charities signature program, has opened its scholarship applications for the 2025–2026 academic year. Employees of all ISSA member companies and their families are encouraged to apply now through April 21.

"Our commitment is not just to financial support but to nurturing the future leaders of the cleaning industry," said ISSA Charities Director of Development Sandy Wolfrum. "As ISSA Scholars continues to invest in the generation, we proudly extend scholarships to deserving students, empowering them to reach new heights in higher education."

With the support of ISSA member companies, ISSA Scholars awarded \$144,500 in financial aid to 42 students in 2024. Member companies looking to provide support can donate to existing funds or develop their own scholarship award. ISSA announces the complete list of scholarship recipients and company sponsors each year.

Apply for a scholarship or donate to ISSA Scholars at issacharities.org.

United States Tour Operators Association (USTOA) Launches New Website...

Late last month, Terry Dale, President & CEO of the United States Tour Operators Association (USTOA), announced the launch of the association's new website. USTOA said it was developed and designed to meet the needs of its core stakeholders of members, travel advisors, and consumers.

"The new USTOA.com site has a vibrant, fresh design and overall streamlined user experience with distinct hub pages for each of our stakeholders," said Dale. "The website communicates to both current and prospective members 'why' USTOA is an essential partner in their businesses, a message that carries through to our valued travel advisor audience. And inspiration for travelers is abundant including details of the USTOA \$1 Million Travelers Assistance

Program," he continued.

USTOA said Active and Associate Members will find an improved user experience and ease of use along with an enhanced event calendar color coded for specific events. The USTOA Sustainability Resources Hub, open to all members, details the association's commitment to a responsible future for travel with links to the USTOA Five Year Sustainability Plan and the USTOA Sustainability Promise, along with a number of educational resources.

For travel advisors and travelers, the USTOA blog features posts from members for travel inspiration around the world. Improved filtering options allow easier navigation to find relevant stories as each post is categorized by destination. The new hub for travelers connects to trusted tour operator members and USTOA certified travel advisors through dedicated links to each.

Find more information at ustoa.com.

CVB Update

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selection will be revealed at a later date during the annual MICHELIN Guide ceremony for Florida.

Visit Milwaukee on February 4 released a suite of trip planning tools that include the 2025 Official Visitors Guide, Official Visitors Map, and new

digital map powered by Map King.

"Milwaukee is a destination with amazing things to see, do, and taste, and our 2025 Official Visitors Guide is the ultimate guidebook," said CMO Josh Albrecht. "Whether you're hunting for the best cultural offerings, planning a festival-packed weekend, or following in the footsteps of your favorite sports stars, this guide and our new digital map from Map King make it easier than ever to explore

Milwaukee like a pro."

Throughout the guide, both visitors and locals will find classic Milwaukee institutions as well as new attractions to visit, restaurants to try, and itineraries to check off their lists.

The 2025 visitors map features more than 200 local businesses throughout the area and includes hotels, attractions, restaurants, breweries, food halls, recreation shopping, and more throughout Milwaukee's

downtown and Wauwatosa.

The 2025 Official Visitors Guide will soon appear at more than 125 welcome centers and kiosks throughout Wisconsin, northern Illinois and in mailboxes, and digital devices around the globe.

To order a copy of this year's Official Visitors Guide or to explore the digital version visit visitmilwaukee.org/official-visitors-guide/.

Fields Obit

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said. "Please keep Lindsey, the other victims, and their families in your hearts."

A "heartbroken" Facebook post from Butler on January 31 shared that a moment of silence was to be observed across all Butler locations on February 3, in honor of both Fields and all those lost in the crash. More than 1,100 interacted with the post, including numerous comments from former students sharing their admiration for Fields.

Heritage Funeral Home posted on Legacy.com that Fields' passion for science and education led her to pursue higher learning, earning a pre-veterinary medicine degree from Seward County Community College, followed by bachelor's and master's degrees in zoology from Oklahoma State University. At the University of Mississippi,

she pursued PhD work in molecular genetics. She interned at the Oklahoma City Zoo and taught at Ole Miss and Northwest Mississippi Community College.

Oklahoma State University shared a message from Dr. Ann Caine, OSU Alumni Association President.

"Among the victims of this week's tragic plane crash in Washington D.C. was one of our own," she wrote. "On behalf of the entire Oklahoma State University community, I extend our heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of OSU alumna and former university employee Lindsey (Carter) Fields, as well as to all those affected by this devastating event. Our thoughts and prayers are with you during this incredibly difficult time. As we mourn this profound loss, we are reminded of the strength and unity that define the Cowboy family. In times of tragedy, we come together to

support one another, honoring the memories of those we have lost. To Lindsey's family, please know that the OSU family stands with you and offers our support and deepest sympathies."

The Science Teachers Association of Texas (STAT) said: "We are deeply saddened by the tragic loss of Lindsey Fields, a dedicated advocate for science education. Her passing is a true loss to the science educator community. Our thoughts are with the NABT leadership, her loved ones, and the other victims and their families during this difficult time."

Fields is survived by her husband, Michael Fields; daughter, Avery; father, Dr. Todd Carter; mother, Feliza Carter; sister, Elizabeth Wakefield; and grandmother, Deborah Carter.

A funeral service will be held on February 22, at Hope Community Church in Andover, Kansas.

The Lindsey (Carter) Fields Me-



morial Science Scholarship, set up on GoFundMe, has been established to empower future scientists to pursue their dreams. As of February 6, more than \$42,000 had been raised [here](https://www.gofundme.com/lindsey-fields).

NEWS

Los Angeles Convention Center Expansion Now in Doubt

By Jonathan Trager

The goal of revamping the Los Angeles Convention Center in time for the 2028 Olympic Games has been nixed given damage caused by the recent fires—and might not happen at all, city officials said last week.

City Administrative Officer Mat Szabo said the event last month made it “impossible” to complete a planned expansion of the facility by the sched-

uled date of May 2028, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on February 4.

The focus of city officials has since shifted to restoring damaged street lights, recreation centers, a library, and other city infrastructure. The total damage has been estimated at \$350 million.

The city council’s economic development committee will take up the matter at a meeting on February 11. The *Times* wrote that Szabo and Chief

Legislative Analyst Sharon Tso plan to give city leaders a series of options for upgrading the facility next month.

“Szabo said he and other analysts are looking at a number of possible strategies, including starting construction, pausing during the Olympics and then resuming once the events are over,” according to the *Times*. “Another possibility, he said, would be to kill the project altogether.”

The estimated \$1.4 billion conven-

tion center project would add 190,000 square feet of exhibit hall space, 55,000 square feet of meeting room space, and 95,000 square feet of multipurpose space. The city council voted last year to spend up to \$54 million on pre-construction work.

Despite the intention of finishing the expansion project by May 2028, an expanded convention center isn’t necessary in order to house the Olympic competitions.

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CEO Opportunity

Lead the Future of One of the South's Most Vibrant Destinations

Fayetteville, Arkansas, is more than a destination—it's a place where authenticity and community pride create an unforgettable experience for visitors and residents alike. As home to the University of Arkansas and the Razorbacks, Fayetteville thrives with a passionate sports culture, diverse culinary scene, live music, theatre, and world-class outdoor recreation. Nestled in the stunning Ozark Mountains, the city offers unparalleled cycling trails, green spaces, and a welcoming atmosphere that make it a standout destination.

Experience Fayetteville, the city's official destination marketing organization, is dedicated to elevating the quality of life for the community through tourism promotion, partnerships, and programs. The organization is seeking a visionary CEO to lead a team of 24 professionals and oversee an annual operating budget of \$6 million. The CEO will drive visitation, enhance tourism assets, and ensure sustainable growth that benefits both visitors and residents.

The Role

The CEO will lead a talented team, collaborating with local businesses, civic leaders, and stakeholders to implement innovative marketing strategies that position Fayetteville as a premier leisure, sports, and events destination. This leader will advocate for tourism investment, strengthen community partnerships, and ensure that tourism enhances the local economy while preserving the city's unique character.

The ideal candidate is a forward-thinking leader with expertise in destination marketing, economic impact strategies, and stakeholder engagement. This individual will champion Fayetteville's growth while ensuring tourism efforts align with the values and priorities of the community.

The Opportunity

With an estimated 7.1 million visitors in 2022 contributing \$600 million in local spending, Fayetteville's tourism industry is thriving. The next CEO will harness this momentum, leveraging Fayetteville's outdoor adventure, SEC sports, entertainment, and community-driven hospitality to create long-term, sustainable tourism success.

If you are a proven leader with a track record of driving economic impact through tourism, experience managing multi-million-dollar budgets and dynamic teams, and the ability to foster strong relationships, we invite you to apply.

For more information and confidential consideration, contact Winner Partners at ExperienceFayetteville@winnerpartners.net.



Key Priorities:

- ✦ **Drive Visitation**
 - Implement data-driven marketing to attract more visitors, increase spending, and extend stays.
- ✦ **Bring out the Best**
 - Elevate Fayetteville's signature events, outdoor recreation, sports, and entertainment offerings to solidify its standing as a premier travel destination.
- ✦ **Keep Community at the Heart**
 - Ensure that tourism growth strengthens local businesses, supports entrepreneurs, artists, and makers, and enhances the overall experience for residents.
- ✦ **Inspire Responsible Investment**
 - Advocate for strategic development of tourism-related infrastructure, including sports, meeting, and recreation facilities.
- ✦ **Build Organizational Effectiveness**
 - Lead with innovation, transparency, and best practices to ensure long-term sustainability and success.