



The AHLA Foundation hosted its annual Night of a Thousand Stars industry awards gala at the Beverly Hilton in Beverly Hills, California, on January 27–28. The event raised more than \$1 million to benefit Los Angeles wildfire relief efforts and honored industry professionals for their outstanding efforts in 2024, including Melvin De La Cruz (center), Assistant to Director of HR, Park Vista a DoubleTree by Hilton, who won the North Star: Lodging Employee of the Year Award. Left to right: Mitch Patel, Founder and CEO, Vision Hospitality Group, and Board Chair, AHLA; Rosanna Maietta, President and CEO, AHLA; De La Cruz; Anu Saxena, President, Hilton Supply Management, and Board Chair, AHLA Foundation; and Anna Blue, President, AHLA Foundation.

Newport, R.I. Mayor Operating Hotel Without Liquor License

Also Serves as Chair of City's Licensing Board

By [Jordan Bradley](#)

A Newport, Rhode Island hotel operated by its mayor—who also chairs the city's licensing board—has been selling alcohol without a valid liquor license for nearly two months.

Newly inducted Newport Mayor Charles Holder was appointed the director of hotel operations at the 21-room boutique Gardiner House hotel on Lee's Wharf in April 2024. The hotel, which was opened in 2023 by Howard Gardiner Cushing's Bloody Bull, has two beverage programs: the Studio Bar, located in the hotel lobby, and Flora, a restaurant on the second floor.

The Gardiner's liquor license expired on December 1, 2024, but the property has continued to serve alcohol on the premises in violation of the Rhode Is-

land General Law and City of Newport ordinance, according to a January 14 letter sent by City Manager Colin Kennedy to Holder and the members of the Board of License Commissioners.

The letter noted that the property had failed to receive R.I. Division of Taxation approval and pay daily late fees accrued as a result—two conditions of approval for the license renewal.

"The City Clerk's Office had made several attempts to contact the licensee regarding the outstanding issues..." the letter read. "No response has been received to date indicating resolution of the outstanding issues."

In a January 21 emailed statement to the *Boston Globe*, Holder said prior to his tenure with the hotel there had been "some errors in accounting,

which is unfortunate in a new business."

It is unclear how much the property owes in fees or on whom the responsibility falls for the hotel's defunct liquor license.

But in an interview with a local NBC affiliate in which he was asked who should be held accountable for the error, Holder said: "Well first off the hotel, for sure and part of this has to do with me."

At a January 22 city council meeting wherein Holder recused himself from ruling on the matter, city solicitor Christopher Behan said it is typical for a business' liquor license to expire and for the city to allow that business to continue to serve alcohol as they iron out license discrepancies.

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NEWS

National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals Opposes Ending DEI Policies

By Todd McElwee

Responding to a series of Executive Orders targeting elimination of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, Jason Dunn Sr., CEO, National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals (NCBMP), shared the association's concerns and began to map out its "Engagement Strategy" in a message to members and other affiliates.

Issued on January 24, the message said NCBMP intentionally positions itself to challenge the status quo when policies are being determined. The coalition strives to be the industry's moral compass when those most directly impacted by a matter are those who are often "voiceless and marginalized," the message added.

"NCBMP is not a political advocacy organization, but our members are impacted by the politics or apathy of our industry's advocacy," Dunn wrote. "We believe that eliminating

the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies, and other Executive Orders causes insurmountable problems at the core of why tourism has become a global economic vehicle. Small business contracts, infrastructure development, hiring practices, enforcement of anti-discriminatory policies, financial resources, and the collapse of moral character are all at risk. Our industry must be keenly aware and act for the benefit of ALL its constituents."

Dunn's correspondence said within the next 30 days, NCBMP will create virtual webinars and activations with relevant speakers educating members on specific Executive Orders and their impact on the industry. NCBMP will also host "Think Tanks" with association executives to assist in navigating the political ecosystem and work with industry partners.

On February 12, NCBMP's Speaker Empowerment Series will feature Ravi

K. Perry, Howard University Professor of Political Science. Perry will discuss the Executive Orders, how they impact the events industry and more in a virtual session.

When asked what the response from members has been to his letter, Dunn noted that NCBMP is not a "monolithic organization."

"Our members represent many perspectives and have shared varying opinions," said Dunn. "Some have expressed disappointment that many industry leaders have chosen to remain quiet. Most have expressed interest in how the country will respond, when the facts about who actually benefits categorically the most from DEI efforts become more widely known. Unfortunately, others have been immediately impacted by budget cuts or emboldened co-workers who choose to celebrate the ugliest side of American history... Lastly, there are those who only want to book business and keep politics out of tourism."

USAE also inquired if other association leaders reached out, and if so, what was their response?

"In fairness, the letter went out



Jason Dunn Sr.

recently and some may not have had a chance to read it," Dunn said. "However, to be direct, the response from other leaders has been slow. I understand that most are in tough positions and frankly still trying to make sense out of everything themselves. I'm sure many will reach out and collectively we will find mutual goals."

The letter also included a link to detailed information from the National Council of Nonprofits on the Executive Orders. [Visit USAE's website for a link to the complete letter.](#)

AHLA Foundation Raises \$1M for L.A. Wildfire Relief

By Jordan Bradley

The American Hotel and Lodging Association (AHLA)'s giving arm, the AHLA Foundation, raised more than \$1 million to benefit the Red Cross and Los Angeles Fire Department Foundation at its annual industry awards gala held January 27–28.

"The event took on special significance this year as the industry demonstrated its commitment to the recovery and resilience of Los Angeles in the wake of recent wildfires," the foundation said.

The organization pledged \$10,000 to support disaster relief efforts and to match up to \$25,000 donated by AHLA members—but by the end of the night, attendees had helped the AHLA Foundation garner \$1,037,325

for the cause.

According to the organization, the influx of donations collected at the event were initiated by Jon Bortz, President and CEO of Pebblebrook Hotel Trust, and his wife, Ellen, who donated \$100,000.

"One of the things I've always loved about this industry is the way it loves its people," said Rosanna Maietta, President and CEO of AHLA. "Night of a Thousand Stars is an opportunity for our industry to celebrate the incredible people who make hospitality all it is. Their stories are so powerful. They are the heart of our industry and the reason the work the AHLA Foundation does is so important to advancing the careers of so many."

The AHLA Foundation hosts more than 400 hotel industry professionals

at the annual Night of a Thousand Stars gala, dedicating the night to recognize outstanding achievements within hospitality. This year, the gala was held at the Beverly Hilton.

"Night of a Thousand Stars is a shining tribute to the exceptional talent that drives hospitality forward, while fueling a stronger future for our industry," said Anna Blue, President of the AHLA Foundation. "Through the Foundation's transformative workforce development programs, we are not just opening doors but creating pathways for individuals to build meaningful, life-changing careers in this extraordinary industry."

Winners of the 2025 Stars of the Industry awards include the following:

- North Star: Lodging Employee of

the Year Award—Melvin De La Cruz, Assistant to Director of HR, The Park Vista a DoubleTree by Hilton

- AHLA Foundation ForWard: Paving the Way Award—Whitney Bergmann, General Manager, Best Western Plus Grant Creek Inn

- Stevan Porter Emerging Hospitality Leader of the Year Award—Nicole Harker, Front Office Manager, Amara Resort & Spa

- Hotel Hero—Jessica Dunnihoo, Executive Housekeeper, Chateau on the Lake Resort Spa & Convention Center

- AHLA Foundation Scholar of the Year Award—Devin Grady, Student, Anne Arundel Community College and Accountant, Gaithersburg Marriott Washingtonian Center

R.I. Mayor

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"After we grant these liquor licenses—in the beginning of December—there are a few license holders each year—three or five or so—who, for any number of reasons, may not have met all the conditions," Behan said when asked by the council to make a recommendation in the case of Gardiner House. "So in this particular case, they

need clearance from the Division of Taxation. They're working on that. I believe they will have that clearance in a couple of days."

Holder did not respond to multiple USAE requests for comment by deadline, nor did representatives from the Gardiner House hotel.

The city council moved to continue the hotel's hearing to the next meeting scheduled for February 12. The hotel is permitted to sell alcohol in the meantime, according to reports.

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HOTS

HOTS BIG GAME BETS

Last year, an American Gaming Association survey revealed that a record 67.8 million American adults (26%) were expected to bet on Super Bowl LVIII—a 35% increase from 2023. An estimated \$23.1 billion was expected to be wagered. According to CBS Sports, the Nevada Gaming Control Board reported the Nevada sportsbooks broke the state record for Super Bowl wagering with \$185.6 million bet on the game, passing the mark of \$179.8 million set in 2022.

Maybe you're just rooting for all the Kansas City Chiefs and Phila-

delphia Eagles players to be safe and have fun, but if you'd like to lay a few bucks down on Super Bowl LIX, here are a few of HOTS' favorite bets for Sunday. Bets were found on DraftKings on January 30. An explanation of +/- is below.

Total Points is set at 48.5. Take the over. Two years ago, the Chiefs escaped with a 38-35 victory over the Eagles in Super Bowl LVII. Both offenses will pick up after slow starts.

Saquon Barkley is +\$260 to be named MVP. HOTS doesn't believe Philly can win without a huge game

from its star running back. He's the only Eagle you can say that about and +\$260 is good value.

Travis Kelce is +\$950 to score the first touchdown. He's Patrick Mahomes' favorite target and will snag the game's first score. FOX is already planning the Taylor Swift shots.

Philadelphia will win the coin toss (+100). Double your fun and bet tails (+100).

How can you bet against the Chiefs? HOTS won't. Lay the 1.5 points and take Kansas City for the win.

In sports betting, plus and minus

odds describe rates of return in the American system of odds, Bet MGM said. When a gambler places a winning bet, they receive their original principal plus winnings, which are calculated based on the odds of the initial wager. Those odds are described by either a plus number or a minus number. Plus numbers generally represent underdogs and higher rates of return. A +180 underdog returns \$180 of profit for every \$100 bet, making underdogs a far more profitable—but also more difficult—betting side.



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HOTS Fire-Breathing Dragon... An iconic metal sculpture of a dragon that breathes real fire in Krakow, Poland, will have to shut its trap for a month while authorities investigate why the statue is devouring so much fuel in recent weeks, the Associated Press reports. The 19-foot statue sits at the foot of Wawel Castle and draws visitors from around the globe to watch it spit fire every three minutes. According to AP, the dragon was made by Polish sculptor Bronislaw Chromy in the late 1960s and refers to an old Krakow legend from centuries back. The story goes that the city was harassed by a blood-thirsty dragon that ate the city's cattle (and the occasional

young maiden. A clever young shoemaker offered the dragon a sheep skin stuffed with sulfur, riddling the scaly beast with indigestion oh so fierce. In an effort to ease his discomfort, the dragon drank so much from the nearby Vistula River that he eventually burst. HOTS wonders: Have the Krakow authorities perhaps tried a TUMS for this gas-guzzling dragon?



HOTS Fire in the Sky... HOTS is apparently feeling the winter weather and is desperately seeking the proverbial fire because a recent headline about a fireball falling from the sky over Midwestern states caught HOTS'

eye. The American Meteor Society received almost 70 reports of a fireball over parts of Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin late in the evening on January 29. No meteor showers were expected around this time, according to the association. Astronomer Jonathan McDowell speculated on social media that the fireball was actually the Starlink-5693 satellite falling out of orbit and plummeting down to earth. UPI reports that there were no reports of satellite pieces crash landing into the ground, making it likely that the satellite burned up completely on reentry. Does this mean HOTS will have to find a safety helmet for nightly strolls with the pooch?

Association Forum Planning Women's Executive Forum To Be UNSTOPPABLE

By Todd McElwee

Artesha Moore, FASAE, CAE, President & CEO, Association Forum, is inviting everyone who is "ready to feel inspired, connect with a powerhouse community, and walk away equipped to lead with purpose and confidence" to join her and the organization for this year's Women's Executive Forum (WEF).

Set for March 7 at Chicago's Convene Willis Tower, WEF will feature a full day of learning, commerce and social opportunities under the banner of "UNSTOPPABLE."

"At the Women's Executive Forum, we're flipping the script," Moore told USAEXtra. "This year's theme, UNSTOPPABLE, was chosen with intention and woven into every part of this event. We're creating a space where relationships are at the heart of learning. Because through relationships, you don't just absorb information—you discover fresh ideas, find unexpected sources of support, and build bonds that reignite your

passion for why you lead.

Moore added: "This event is about so much more than content. It's about connection, community, and walking away with sparks of inspiration that fuel innovation—not just for the attendees but for the entire association industry. I'm telling you; the energy of this event stays with you all year long. The Women's Executive Forum is more than a one-day experience—it's a movement, and we want you to be part of it."

Wendy Borlabi, PhD, a high-performance expert and sport psychology consultant for the Chicago Bulls, is handling keynote duties. Moore said her message about becoming UNSTOPPABLE is going to "set the room on fire."

Sessions on AI, data employment, leadership and succession planning are all on the agenda. New for 2025, exhibitors will receive a tabletop to display products and services while mingling with attendees. The Forum said exhibits have been carefully curated to enhance the attendee

experience.

"From national speakers to transformative breakout sessions, this year's forum is packed with opportunities to learn, connect, and elevate your entrepreneurial spirit," said Moore. "This isn't just an event—it's a space designed specifically for women to lean into their power and potential."

This year's Woman of Influence Award winner is Cie Armstead, Founder and Principal of Owlser-vations. An authority on diversity and inclusion, she has served as the Director of Diversity & Inclusion, American College of Healthcare Executives and led the American College of Surgeons' DEI efforts as Administrative Director of its Office of Inclusive Excellence.

"Armstead's journey is awe-inspiring and will leave us all charged up and ready to move our industry forward in bold, exciting ways," Moore said.

Find more information at associationforum.org.

NEWS

Henri Fourrier Retiring as Head of Greensboro Area CVB

By Jonathan Trager

Henri Fourrier, President & CEO of the Greensboro Area CVB in central North Carolina, has announced his retirement after three decades of leadership.

Fourrier, who assumed his role in December 1996, will step down at the end of June. The Greensboro/Guilford County Tourism Development Authority, which oversees the Greensboro Area CVB, has begun the search for Fourrier's successor.

"Greensboro has been very good to me for my career," said Fourrier. "I hope that I was good for Greensboro in return."

During his tenure, Fourrier played a

pivotal role in reshaping the summer tourism landscape by attracting youth sporting events to Greensboro and boosting sports tourism during previously quieter months. His strategic leadership was instrumental in securing the construction of the Greensboro Aquatic Center by leveraging hotel tax revenue and bond funding—making Greensboro a top swimming and diving destination.

Fourrier also cultivated strong partnerships with organizations, including USA Track & Field (USATF) and the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), establishing Greensboro as a premier East Coast "track mecca."

Kelly Harrill, Chair of the Greensboro/Guilford County Tourism Development

Authority, said Fourrier "has been a staple of Greensboro's Hospitality Community for 28 years and we will miss his leadership greatly."

"Henri has taken the lead on so many different initiatives to bring incredible sporting groups, association groups, faith-based groups, and the like that have brought millions of dollars of economic impact to Guilford County, and we are all indebted to him for that," said Harrill.



Henri Fourrier

Foursome of Plenary Speakers Headlining MPI's EMEC

By Todd McElwee

MPI has enlisted a quartet of plenary speakers to help disseminate its European Meetings & Events Conference's (EMEC) theme of "Great Events Create Harmony."

The speakers will share insights and spark attendees' curiosities in Istanbul, Türkiye, from February 22–25.

Filiz Akdede, Global Vice President, 3D Business, HP; Elif Balcı Fisunoğlu, Vice General Manager, Tourism Operations and Development, Türkiye Tourism Promotion and Development Agency; Richard Newman, Founder and CEO, UK Body Talk; and Nils

Roemen, Experience Designer, Experience Experts, will contribute to EMEC's theme throughout their respective addresses. Plenary sessions are akin to keynote addresses.

"This is your chance to participate in sessions and workshops designed to transform your approach to event management, infused with local and global perspectives," MPI said.

MPI said EMEC will explore the five transformative factors shaping the future of work with Akdede, who has been named one of "Türkiye's Most Effective Women Leaders." She will look at AI, 3D developments, trends and innovation.

"Discover how these transformative factors will redefine the event planning industry and workforce management and leverage new opportunities to lead your organization and peers into the future of work," MPI said.

In "Pathways to Sustainability: National Sustainable Tourism Program of Türkiye," Fisunoğlu will highlight her nation's green efforts. The Tourism Promotion and Development Agency was founded by Ministry of Tourism. She has held senior and managerial positions in organizations across various aspects of the Turkish and European tourism spheres, including 14 years at the

Istanbul CVB (ICVB). She also served for two years as Regional Director – Europe at the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) in Amsterdam.

Crafting beautiful events is the specialty of Roemen. He was the founder of Boudewijns & Roemen Groep and co-founder of Waarmakerij and graduated from the Hogeschool van Arnhem en Nijmegen (HAN), an applied science school.

"Dive in and learn how to create events that leave a lasting impression on the hearts of your guests," organizers said. "It's time to get personal and

Please turn to page 5

Choice Hotels Brings Collection of Westgate Resorts to Booking Platform

By Jordan Bradley

Choice Hotels International and Westgate Resorts announced on January 23 that travelers can now book stays at 21 Westgate properties across nine states through Choice's booking platform.

The partnership expands Choice's luxury and upscale, full-service property offerings to more than 1,000 resorts, Choice said.

The partnership also allows members of Choice's loyalty program, Choice Privileges, to reserve stays at Westgate properties with points.

"We are so pleased to collaborate with Westgate Resorts, giving travelers and over 68 million Choice Privileges members a compelling range of hotel options," said Noha Abdalla, Chief Marketing Officer at Choice. "The addition of these properties further solidifies our commitment to delivering more diverse travel experiences, while providing Choice Privileges members with even more ways to use their points and maximize their rewards."

Travelers staying at one of the 21 Westgate Resorts can expect "a range of exciting amenities and onsite experiences," including water parks, horseback riding, and ski-in/ski-out accommodations, Choice said.

The 21 Westgate Resorts available for booking at [ChoiceHotels.com](https://www.choicehotels.com) are located throughout Florida as well as in Park City, Utah; Las Vegas; New York City; Branson and Hollister, Missouri; Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, Tennessee; Myrtle Beach, South Carolina; Williamsburg, Virginia; and

Mesa, Arizona.

"We are incredibly excited that our hotels are now bookable through [ChoiceHotels.com](https://www.choicehotels.com) and for this collaboration," said Jared Saft, Chief Business & Strategy Officer at Westgate. "Choice Privileges consistently ranks as one of the best hotel loyalty programs in the United States, and we are honored to make our resorts available to all of Choice's loyal guests."

Westgate Resorts was established as a 16-unit resort at Westgate Vacation Villas in 1982 by David Siegel in Orlando, and has since expanded to more than 14,000 luxury villas and hotel rooms, according to the Westgate corporate website.

In recent months, Choice has made moves to expand its presence in the upscale segment, including the relaunch of several of its acquired Radisson brands, which included new logos and food and beverage upgrades from properties within the Radisson portfolio.



The Westgate Park City Resort and Spa in Park City, Utah, is one of 21 Westgate resorts that have joined Choice's booking platform and loyalty program.

USAE*Exchange*

Conversation with Kristin McGrath, Executive Director, Visit Pasadena

By Jonathan Trager

The wildfires that broke out in the L.A. area last month drew the attention of many concerned individuals and organizations who rallied to support those affected. Last week, USAE spoke with Visit Pasadena's Kristin McGrath CDME, about the situation and the ensuing response. For more information about recovery efforts in the area, visit visitspasadena.com/eaton-fire.

USAE: What are the conditions on the ground there now?

McGrath: People are incredibly kind and cognizant of those around them. It's also moving to know that we're still getting several calls each day at the convention center from community members and people around the world who want to send donations to displaced residents. Regarding the community sentiment, I believe the initial shock is wearing off, and the heartbreak is setting in. Still, the people of Pasadena and our neighbors are resilient and ready to start the rebuilding process and move forward.

The fire didn't impact any of Pasadena's tourism assets or main business districts, and air quality is good. I think it's really important that folks outside of the L.A. area understand the fires really only touched 2% of L.A. County. Altadena [just north of Pasadena] was severely impacted by the fire; they're our neighbors and

an integral part of our community, so that's devastating. But Pasadena remains a vibrant, wonderful place to visit and host meetings. One of the most important things people can do to help recovery will be supporting local businesses and restaurants.

USAE: How have the wildfires impacted convention center bookings?

McGrath: We had to quickly come up with a communications plan to talk to our clients who were going to be impacted by the facility becoming unavailable. We had to make some phone calls to our definite clients who were planning to arrive in January.

In total, 17 groups had to cancel or reschedule their events. Of those, 12 were able to postpone over the next few months, and five were unable to be postponed. There is quite a variety of group types, including consumer shows, sports competitions, arts and entertainment, and conferences and associations. Based on the group, the expected attendance at those specific shows ranged from 200–6,000. We're fortunate that all our clients were extremely understanding of what was going on in Pasadena. The business aspect of it, of course, sets in, and we understand that while some of them couldn't be postponed, we're hopeful they'll return to host their group in the next fiscal year.

I'd like to highlight the remarkable response of The Yoga Expo, whose



event was scheduled for Saturday, January 11—just three days after the fire began. Despite the challenges, they quickly pivoted to offer a series of free virtual lessons and classes, fostering healing, unity, and connection within the community. In an inspiring act of generosity, they also encouraged attendees to donate what they could to support those affected by the fire. The preliminary numbers were well over \$3,000 by the end of day on January 11, with 100% of donations going to Global Empowerment Mission for on-the-ground relief.

USAE: What has been the industry response to the situation?

McGrath: Folks from our hotels and our clients were very concerned about what's going on. Our convention center was activated as an evacuation shelter. It was a 30-day commitment.

Don Welsh [President & CEO of Destinations International] had reached out to me early on to check in and see how we were doing personally and express concern for our community. He was looking for ways to immediately help and he asked for a suggestion about where dollars would best be deployed. I suggested the

Pasadena Community Foundation. I was so grateful for DI's leadership and the staff, as well as Scott White, the current Chair of the association, and Amir Eylon, the current Chair of the foundation, in pulling together as quickly as they did.

USAE: What crisis-oriented advice do you have for destination organizations?

McGrath: I think that anyone in any leadership position like a destination organization knows the importance of having a crisis management plan. That plan could be for a natural disaster or something else, but it's important that you make sure you have some sort of blueprint to work. When a crisis is happening, it's important to lean on your plan but also to exercise flexibility in making decisions relevant to the situation you have in front of you.

I think my biggest piece of advice is don't be afraid to lean on your peers and others in the industry. I've had several conversations with DMO leaders from the L.A. area and from Visit California and from my peers at other DMOs across this country. Learning from other people's experiences has been really helpful.

MPI Speakers

continued from page 4
touch the heart?"

Over the past 24 years, Newman and his team have trained more than 130,000 business leaders around the world. He is the author of two books, *You Were Born to Speak* and *Lift Your Impact*, and will

share a variety of success stories and tips for memorable and effective communication

"When you change the way you deliver your ideas through the science of storytelling, you will transform how people respond to you and gain more respect," MPI said.

Find more information at emec.mpi.org.

ASAE and Los Angeles Tourism Committed to Hosting Annual Meeting

By Todd McElwee

Roughly six months out from ASAE's Annual Meeting & Exposition's stay at the Los Angeles Convention Center (LACC) from August 9–12, neither the association nor Los Angeles Tourism expressed concern when asked by USAE about the city being able to host the event as it recovers from catalytic wildfires.

"ASAE is 100% committed to hosting its 2025 ASAE Annual Meeting & Exposition in Los Angeles this summer," Chris Vest, CAE, Vice President, Corporate Communications & Public Relations, ASAE, told USAE. "We have been in regular contact with

our partners at Discover Los Angeles about the meeting of course, but also just to show our support for the greater Los Angeles community at this difficult time. We look forward to supporting the city's recovery and renewal and hosting an ASAE Annual Meeting that serves as a testament to the power of collaboration, innovation, and leadership—values that define not just our industry but the spirit of Los Angeles itself."

The ASAE Research Foundation is raising funds from the ASAE community to assist the hundreds of thousands of residents in the greater Los Angeles community impacted by the fires.

On January 10, the LACC posted it was open and fully operational and there had been no reports of fire near the Downtown Los Angeles area where the building is located. The post has not been updated.

Adam Burke, President & CEO, Los Angeles Tourism, said: "Our City of Angels is open for business, and the best way you can support our community's recovery is to continue bringing your events to L.A. We're fully ready and looking forward to hosting ASAE this coming August, and we're grateful to Michelle Mason and her team for their exceptional support and partnership.

"Thanks to the heroic efforts of first

responders, the recent fires have been contained and the vast majority of our destination—including attractions, event venues, hotels, restaurants, and the L.A. Convention Center remain fully operational."

Burke added: "In fact, L.A. has continued to welcome major meetings and events, including the Society of Thoracic Surgeons last week, and the Americas Lodging Investment Summit (ALIS) and the GRAMMY Awards this week. We remain confident that Los Angeles will continue to be a premier destination for professional meetings and events, and are deeply grateful for the overwhelming outpouring of support from across the industry."

Women Leading the Way

Laura Hay Tackles Challenges Facing Ohio's CPAs

By [Jordan Bradley](#)

Laura Hay, CPA, CAE, the newest President and CEO for the Ohio Society of Certified Public Accountants (OSCPA), describes herself as someone “who relishes a challenge.”

But it is anyone with a stereotypical concept of a CPA who will be challenged when they learn that Hay practices Taekwondo – breaking her first concrete slab in her 40s – and CrossFit, which she did while undergoing chemotherapy in her 50s.

Hay is also the first woman to lead the OSCPAs in its more-than-100-year history.

“I’m honored to serve as the first woman leader of our organization,” Hay told USAE. “But more than anything, I see myself as a leader who is committed to advancing our profession and serving our members.”

Hay joined the OSCPAs as COO in 1992, rose to executive vice president in 2014, and finally took on her current role in January. Part of her work with the association has involved educating members through OSCPAs courses—work for which she is highly regarded, according to the association’s release announcing her promotion.

An Ohio native, Hay earned her bachelors in accounting from Miami University. After graduating with honors, she went to work as an auditor with Price Waterhouse, serving as the outside auditor for OSCPAs for two years before she returned to higher education to pursue graduate studies.

After her studies, Hay began her tenure at OSCPAs—where she remained for the last 32 years stoking a personal passion for her profession, she said.

“I was chosen for this role because of my experience, passion and deep understanding of our mission,” Hay said. “Having said that, I recognize that representation matters, and I hope my leadership reinforces the idea that opportunities in our profession—and in leadership—are based on talent, hard work and commitment from all backgrounds, experiences and perspectives. My focus has always been on building a strong, forward-thinking organization that serves all of our members, and that’s what continues to drive me every day.”

Hay’s vision of leadership as she steps into the role is focused on the OSCPAs’s shared vision for the organization, its members, and the future of the CPA profession; strong dedication to that vision; and being results-driven, she said, but noted that the significance of her becoming the first female leader at the organization was not lost on her.

She describes herself as a “huge fan” of Jim Collins, author and creator of the Level 5 Leadership concept. As such, Hay puts an emphasis on maintaining humility, putting the mission and team before her personal ambition, adaptability, “and fierce resolve” in her approach to leadership.

“For me, true leadership is about service: empowering others, staying



grounded in our core values, and ensuring that we leave our organization and our profession stronger for the future,” Hay said.

Looking forward, Hay said the association is honing in on concerns that weigh on every association leader’s mind when it comes to 2025 objectives: talent acquisition and retention, advocacy efforts, and tech.

The OSCPAs anticipates that 65% of Ohio’s CPAs are approaching retirement and CPA jobs are on track to grow by 22% by 2028, widening an existing workforce gap. As part of its response, the OSCPAs launched its “Look Beyond” campaign this December designed to attract students to the field, as part of its Workforce Development Coalition.

“Through that coalition, we’re developing programs, communication campaigns, and skill building initiatives to help ensure that the CPA workforce remains strong and adaptable and prepared for the future,” Hay said. “So it’s not just about filling jobs, but it’s about changing the narrative, shaping the future of the profession, and creating meaningful career pathways. So we’re looking forward to expanding its reach and its impact in the coming months.”

A recent success in that vein was the passing of Ohio House Bill 238 this January, which opened up alternative pathways for future CPAs to gain

licensure. The state is the first in the country to pass such a measure, which goes into effect on January 1, 2026.

“That will help us in building a more resilient profession, because it provides for differences in how people approach career paths to enter the profession without compromising the standards that define who we are in building the public trust,” Hay said.

She said she and OSCPAs are also considering ways to approach artificial intelligence as an association and in best practices for CPAs.

“The pace of change—artificial intelligence and automation are transforming our profession like I’m sure they’re transforming a lot of professions,” Hay said. “So those innovations can create efficiencies, but they also require the profession to adapt and upskill and redefine our value in the increasingly data-driven world.”

Hay knows the numbers of her profession inside and out, and her passion for the work that CPAs do is evident when she speaks about the role CPAs play within a community.

“It’s a quiet profession,” Hay told USAE. “But when you think about it CPAs are doing all the things that allow businesses [they service] to exist, things that allow the owner to focus on the work that they’re passionate about. [CPAs] are people that are needed, and they’re helping in their communities.”

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NEWS

Hyatt Debuts Bunkhouse Hotels Brand in Houston

By [Jordan Bradley](#)

Hyatt unveiled its newest Bunkhouse Hotel property, the Hotel Saint Augustine, in Houston's Museum District on January 23, debuting its first hotel in that market.

The 71-guest room and suite boutique hotel sits on a little more than 2 acres in the district's Montrose neighborhood. It features a Gulf Coast-inspired restaurant, event space, and an all-day lobby lounge and listening room.

"We are thrilled to join the Houston community, and more specifically, Montrose neighborhood, as we open the doors to Hotel Saint Augustine," said Omar Abreu, General Manager at the hotel. "Montrose's rich cultural history, unique and welcoming charm, and its proximity to multiple beloved art institutions make it a destination for locals and travelers alike."

The hotel's name follows a Bunkhouse tradition of naming properties after saints, Hyatt said. Saint Augustine was chosen for the hotel

for a number of reasons: as a nod to Saint Augustine's designation as the patron saint of printing and the nearby Menil Drawing Institute; a Houston co-founder, Augustus Chapman Allen, shared a similar name; "the abundance" of Saint Augustine grass is found throughout the city; and as a reference to the month of August and the "hazy, late summer nostalgia it brings."

The Hotel Saint Augustine's lobby is designed to "mimic a curator's private home" and evokes the feeling of "a layered living room with rich interiors and saturated colors." Just past the lobby bar, guests are welcome to enjoy the Listening Room with its collection of tape and record players providing a "constant flow of music," Hyatt said. Plans for activations within the Listening Room are forthcoming from the hotel.

The hotel's restaurant, Perseid, takes its name from the annual Perseid meteor shower seen in early August, and serves a blend of Texas Gulf Coast flavors and French-inspired dishes.

The restaurant was created by Houston chef and restaurateur Aaron Bludorn and Cherif Mbodji, Director of Operations at Bludorn, a semifinalist in the 2024 James Beard Awards. It is one of three restaurants the pair have launched in the city.

The hotel's developer, the Marchbanks Company, has long eyed a hotel for the district within Houston, said CEO Greg Marchbanks.

"For over 20 years, people have been talking to me about the need for a hotel in the Museum District," Marchbanks said. "Not just any hotel—they wanted it to be the right one: a property at the correct scale with a commitment to seamlessly blending into the neighborhood both aesthetically and by offering public spaces where local Houstonians want to gather."

Bunkhouse has also been looking for the right opportunity to establish a hotel in the city, according to Hyatt.

"Adding a Bunkhouse hotel in Houston has been our team's dream for a long time," said Amar Lalvani, who recently took on the role of President and Creative Director, Lifestyle, Hyatt, after leading The Standard and Bunkhouse Hotels brands for the past decade. "Houston is an under-appreciated capital of culinary, culture, art, and design, and those things are all core to the Bunkhouse mission. We can't wait to become a part of such a rich and diverse local community and introduce new visitors to a city we love."

Rooms begin at \$429 a night. More information can be found at saintaugustinehouston.com.

Creator of Starwood Hotel Brand Announces Plans to Relaunch

By [Jordan Bradley](#)

Hotelier Barry Sternlicht, creator of the Starwood Hotels and Resorts brand, intends to bring the brand back to life, the *New York Times* reports.

Sternlicht, Chairman and CEO of Starwood Capital Group, will rebrand his current hotel company, SH Hotels and Resorts, to Starwood Hotels and Resorts this month.

The rebrand will include three hotel brands, according to *Hotel Investment Today*: 1 Hotels, an environmentally minded lifestyle brand; Baccarat Hotels, a luxury lifestyle brand; and Treehouse Hotels, a whimsical brand designed to inspire childhood nostalgia.

Sternlicht told the *Times* that at least one more brand is also in the works.

"This is my passion," he said. "Designing hotels and keeping them on brand is fun."

The new Starwood will launch with 14 operational hotels across the three brands, and with 22 hotels in various stages of development across the globe. Properties opening this year from the com-

pany are in Tokyo, Melbourne, the Silicon Valley, Copenhagen, Seattle, and Manchester, England.

Sternlicht started the Starwood Hotels and Resorts brand in 1991. He and Starwood were responsible for launching W Hotels in 1998 and are known as an innovator of hotel loyalty programs, establishing the Starwood Preferred Guest rewards program in 1999.

When Marriott bought the name and brand in 2016 for \$13 billion, Starwood Hotels was comprised of 1,300 properties across 11 brands, including Westin, Sheraton and the St. Regis brands.

In an interview with *Hotel Investment Today* at the American Lodging Investment Summit held January 28–30, Raul Leal, CEO of SH Hotels & Resorts said that the Starwood brand name had reverted back to Starwood Capital, Sternlicht's private equity firm.

"We thought with all the growth that we have coming, now is the right time to reposition SH as Starwood," Leal said. "It's a company with such a brand legacy—it's beloved. People still ask me about the points programs....We have a lot of plans and surprises for Starwood 2.0."

CVB Update

The Greater Miami CVB (GMCVB)

on January 28 announced the return of Rainbow Spring, its annual LGBTQ+ program.

Now in its third year, Rainbow Spring runs March 1 through June 30. The initiative "continues to grow and provide LGBTQ+ visitors with a dynamic array of unique programming and promotional offers, enhancing their experience throughout the spring season," according to the GMCVB. This year, the GMCVB is once again joining forces with long-time partner, Expedia, and expanding the program's international reach through a new partnership with [Booking.com](#). This collaboration will target key markets, including Madrid, Berlin, Amsterdam, Milan, and Brussels, further cementing Greater Miami and Miami Beach as a global hub for LGBTQ+ travelers.

"Greater Miami and Miami Beach takes pride in being a welcoming community for LGBTQ+ travelers year-round," said Dan Rios, GMCVB Director of LGBTQ+ Tourism Marketing. "With Rainbow Spring, we continue to offer meaningful experiences to ensure our LGBTQ+ visitors feel seen, celebrated, and represented when they visit."

Bookings for the program are set to launch on February 3. For comprehensive LGBTQ+ information and exclusive offers, visit <https://www.miamiandbeaches.com/>.

Destination Dayton in Ohio on January 29 unveiled the release of its free 2025 Destination Dayton

Visitors Guide.

The 40-page guide contains all the information needed to plan a trip to, or staycation in, the "Birthplace of Aviation."

"We're excited to unveil our 2025 Visitors Guide, showcasing the vibrant experiences Dayton and Montgomery County offer," said Jacquelyn Powell, President & CEO of Destination Dayton. "Whether you're a visitor, local, or event planner, it's your go-to resource for discovering Dayton's unique and unexpected charm. From our rich legacy of innovation to our dynamic outdoor adventures, thriving cultural scene, and top-tier amenities for hosting events of all kinds, the guide showcases the very best of what makes Dayton and Montgomery County extraordinary."

Highlights of the new guide include detailed information on the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, the world's largest military aviation museum, and the Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park, which celebrates the legacy of the Wright Brothers.

In addition, the guide features itineraries for art enthusiasts, showcasing venues such as the Dayton Art Institute and Schuster Performing Arts Center as well as outdoor adventurers, highlighting the nation's largest network of paved trails spanning more than 350 miles.

Visitors can access a digital version of the 2025 Visitors Guide or request a free print copy online <https://www.daytoncvb.com/>.

THE FINAL WORD

Upcoming Super Bowl Shows New Orleans Is Built to Host



By Stephanie Turner,
Sr. Vice President, Convention Sales
and Strategies,
New Orleans & Company

In New Orleans, we execute big events with ease, and it is our honor to host our record-tying eleventh NFL Championship game, Super Bowl LIX, on February 9.

From high-profile association meetings to world-class conventions, New

Orleans blends history, innovation, and hospitality to create exceptional experiences. New Orleans delivers with precision, expertise, and an unwavering commitment to our customer and guests.

For our clients, every meeting is their own championship—the culmination of months or years of planning. At New Orleans & Company, we're proud to partner with organizations to book thousands of meetings each year that meet in hotels, at the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center and at the Caesars Superdome. Our expert convention sales and services teams, and

our welcoming hospitality community ensures each event is executed seamlessly. We've earned the trust of meeting professionals around the country and are a favorite for attendees because of our authentic culture, which seamlessly becomes a part of the attendee experience.

These events, and many more, highlight New Orleans' ability to host a wide variety of inspired meetings, while giving attendees access to the

city's world-class culture, cuisine, and entertainment.

Our relationships in the association marketplace span decades, built on trust, collaboration, and a shared commitment to success. These long-standing partnerships are key to attracting top-tier events and positioning New Orleans as a destination Built to Host events of any scale. New Orleans' commitment to hosting events that leave a lasting impact is further demonstrated by our impressive third place ranking in the Top 250 Meetings Destinations study. The "Top 250" study found that 88%

of the top 250 conventions in the country will meet in only 20 cities and New Orleans lands on the list at number three. Conducted in 2024 by 2Synergize, LLC, Destinations International and Simpleview, the study analyzed the largest conventions of 2,700+ or more hotel rooms on peak night. New Orleans' high ranking reinforces that customers appreciate New Orleans' walkability, compact geographic footprint, world-class venues, unmatched culture, and hospitality expertise. This prestigious ranking affirms our meetings brand, Built to Host.

Around Associations

ABA Marketplace 2025 Running in Philly... The American Bus Association (ABA) is hosting its ABA Marketplace 2025 from February 1–4 in Philadelphia. More than 2,500 individuals are participating.

"ABA is proud to unite a diverse membership representing leaders from motorcoach and charter bus, group travel, and tourism organizations for the largest event of the year," said Fred Ferguson, President & CEO, American Bus Association. "With U.S. travel and tourism spending projected to grow in 2025 and consumers planning to travel more, Marketplace serves as a vital platform for our members to forge meaningful connections and stay informed about the latest innovations in the travel and motorcoach industries." A full slate of education, networking and more is on the schedule. Find more information at buses.org.

NFIB Welcomes Scott Bessent's Confirmation as Secretary of the Treasury... The National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB) recently congratulated Scott Bessent on being confirmed as Secretary of the Treasury in a bipartisan vote. NFIB said that during his confirmation hearing Bessent spoke about the far-reaching, negative consequences for small business owners should the 20% Small Business Tax Deduction expire, noting that: "I think it would be devastating...especially for small businesses."

"Congratulations to Scott Bessent on his confirmation as Treasury Secretary," said Brad Close, NFIB President. "Small Businesses are half of our economy, and we appreciate his focus on the needs of Main Street, especially the importance of stopping the massive tax hike on small businesses by making the 20% Small Business Deduction permanent. We look forward to working with Secre-

tary Bessent, the White House and Congress to provide permanent tax relief for more than 30 million small businesses."

NBAA Honors Etter with Silk Scarf... The National Business Aviation Association (NBAA) has presented its Silk Scarf Award to Gulfstream Aerospace Staff Scientist and Technical Fellow Charles Etter, in recognition of his longtime commitment to aviation's environmental footprint. Etter announced his retirement from the company at the end of 2024.

"Charles has been a tireless, effective advocate for promoting innovations that not only enhance business aviation sustainability, but improve operations overall," said NBAA President & CEO Ed Bolen. "We are pleased to present Charles with NBAA's Silk Scarf Award."

NBAA said Etter's work helped Gulfstream become among the earliest and most ardent voices on the need for an industry focus on environmental stewardship, helping to galvanize the sector around pioneering the Business Aviation Commitment on Climate Change. First presented in 2009 and updated in 2021, the document provides a framework for the industry to achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

Etter, who joined Gulfstream in 1996, has worked with renewable fuel experts from around the world on initiatives to foster the availability and use of sustainable aviation fuels (SAF). He was part of the Gulfstream team that completed the world's first trans-Atlantic flight on 100% SAF, conducted by a G600 aircraft on November 19, 2023. Etter has also served as a technical advisor to the International Coordinating Council of Aerospace Industry Association and the International Business Aviation Council on environmental topics.

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