



The Georgia Association of Convention & Visitors Bureaus and industry representatives on March 5 presented Gov. Brian Kemp with a check that represented the \$5 billion in state and local tax revenue generated by tourism-related spending in 2024. The presentation marked Georgia's 2025 Tourism Day at the Capitol. See story on page 5

## Family Sues Hotel Employee, Choice Hotels for Defamation

*Room Attendant Mistook  
Dinosaur Leash for Sex Toy*

By Jordan Bradley

A Springfield, Missouri, family is suing the employee of a Branson Quality Inn hotel and Choice Hotels International for defamation and negligence after a Facebook post by the employee accused the father of lewd sexual conduct in the presence of their children.

Thomas and Alicia Millikin stayed at the Quality Inn Branson – Hwy 76 Central between February 28 and March 2 with their children, according to the suit.

When the family checked out, their 9-year-old daughter “accidentally left in the room a leash attachment to the walking dinosaur toy that Plaintiffs had bought her at Branson’s Wild World,” a wildlife park the family had visited during their stay.

While cleaning the hotel room later that day, the suit alleges, Noni Clay found the toy leash “and perceived it to be a BDSM riding crop.”

Clay then posted about the toy in  
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## Greg Edwards, Head of Catch Des Moines, Retiring

By Jonathan Trager

Greg Edwards, President & CEO of Catch Des Moines, has announced his retirement after 25 years at the helm of the organization.

Edwards, 69, will step down from the role this summer but will stay on to help with the leadership transition, the Iowa organization announced this month. A search

committee will work with Search-Wide Global to identify the group’s new leader.

“It’s been one of the greatest honors of my life to serve our community in this position,” said Edwards. “Seeing the region evolve into this vibrant and thriving destination and working alongside everyone who has been a part of this journey has been truly remarkable and humbling. I

believe the foundation that we’ve built here with the incredible team at Catch will ensure that the tourism industry here will continue to flourish and grow.”

During his tenure, Edwards brought marquee events to the region such as NCAA Wrestling Championships, NCAA DI Men’s Basketball Tournament First and Second Rounds, AAU Junior Olympic Games,  
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## The Vanderpump Hotel Set to Debut on Las Vegas Strip

By Todd McElwee

Caesars Entertainment and Lisa Vanderpump are partnering once again.

Bringing what the groups call a “bold, new brand and an original concept” to the Las Vegas Strip, The Cromwell, a standalone boutique hotel on the corner of Las Vegas Boulevard and Flamingo Road, will undergo a complete renovation and transition into The Vanderpump Hotel in early 2026.

“I am thrilled to once again be partnering with Caesars Entertainment, this time to venture into the

hotel business,” said Lisa Vanderpump. “What an extraordinary opportunity to develop this iconic location into something unique, playful and upscale. Hospitality has always been our passion, and our mission is to create something sumptuous with a unique atmosphere. Our successful history has always been based on the individuality of the location. Through my design company, Vanderpump Alain, with my partner Nick Alain, we can’t wait to breathe new life into this property and  
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## FEMA Employee Fired Over Migrant Hotel Stays Sues Trump Administration

By Jordan Bradley

A former employee of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) who was fired over reimbursement funds for New York City hotels housing migrants sued the Trump administration for defamation and unlawful termination on March 4.

Mary Comans, the former Chief Financial Officer at FEMA, was one of four FEMA employees fired one day after billionaire Elon Musk claimed in a February

10 social media post that the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) had found that FEMA funds were used for to house migrants in “luxury hotels.”

Comans’ lawsuit, filed in the District of Columbia, names FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as defendants and claims that Comans was fired “without any warning.”

“The Defendants failed to undertake any process to enable Ms. Comans to  
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# NEWS

## Widow of Man Who Died at Palazzo Sues Venetian for Wrongful Death

By Jordan Bradley

The widow of a man who died of a fentanyl overdose after being robbed by a sex worker in March 2023 at the Palazzo in Las Vegas is suing the property for wrongful death.

Jeffrey Jacoby, 55, a Colorado resident, was attending a work conference in Las Vegas in March 2023, according to court documents filed on February 26 in a Clark County court. During that time, the lawsuit alleges, Jacoby was staying at the Palazzo, owned by Venetian Resorts, and met a woman named Cheylee Kessee, 24, at the hotel bar around 1 a.m. local time on March 1.

According to the lawsuit, Kessee was operating as a sex worker that night. The pair allegedly walked around the hotel casino for about 40 minutes before they went to a cashier's cage where Jacoby withdrew \$1,000. Kessee and Jacoby then went to his hotel room, the filing states, and Kessee left less than 10 minutes later alone.

Throughout the evening, the lawsuit alleges that Kessee was texting with Kason Glass, 38, who was acting as her "pimp" and plotting with Kessee to rob Jacoby.

Later that morning, at Jennifer's request, a hotel employee made a welfare check on Jacoby and found him "unresponsive, slumped on the bathroom floor," according to the suit. He was also found without his cell phone and wallet, court documents said.

Kessee and Glass were later charged with several crimes, including murder charges, and were accused of giving Jacoby a lethal dose of fentanyl.

In 2024, Glass and Kessee took plea deals on charges related to Jacoby's death, according to local news outlet 8 News Now.

Both admitted guilt to charges of robbery and voluntary manslaughter, according to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.

Defendants in the filing are listed as: the Venetian Casino Resort, Venetian Las Vegas Gaming, LLC, and Pioneer OpCo, a subsidiary of Apollo Global



Jeffrey Jacoby died in his hotel room at the Palazzo of a fentanyl overdose in March 2023.

Management.

In the lawsuit, prosecutors allege that "defendants had knowledge of Kessee and Glass' history of targeting hotel guests to rob and victimize them" and that security on the Strip property "made no effort" to remove either Kessee or Glass from the prop-

erty, thereby failing to protect Jacoby.

The lawsuit, which is asking for a jury trial and \$15,000 in damages, also names Jacoby's three daughters, Halle, Hannah, and Heidi, as plaintiffs.

Representatives from the Venetian did not return *USAE* request for comment.

## ASAE's Executive Leadership Forum 2025 to Take Place in Montréal

By Todd McElwee

Montréal Marriott Chateau Champlain is set to host ASAE's Executive Leadership Forum (ELF) from June 25–27.

The event is designed for senior-level association executives and provides a concentrated learning and networking environment where association CEOs and C-suite leaders can explore the challenges and opportunities shaping their organizations.

"ASAE is excited to bring the Executive Leadership Forum 2025 to Montréal, a dynamic city that embodies innovation, collaboration, and leadership," said Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE, President & CEO, ASAE. "This year's exceptional speaker

lineup will challenge and inspire attendees, equipping them with the insights and strategies needed to lead with confidence in an ever-evolving landscape. Our longstanding partnership with Destination Canada Business Events has been instrumental in making this event a premier experience for association leaders, and Montréal provides the perfect setting for meaningful dialogue, fresh perspectives, and transformative ideas."

The two-day forum features an interactive format to foster conversation and peer-to-peer engagement. This year's ELF provocateur, Lori Anderson, FASAE, CAE, President & CEO, International Sign Association, will guide the dialogue.

ELF 2025 will showcase an eclectic lineup of speakers, each bringing unique expertise and insights:

- Sophie Grégoire Trudeau—A mental health advocate and champion for gender equality, youth self-esteem, and emotional literacy, Trudeau is the author of *Closer Together: Knowing Ourselves, Loving Each Other*, an exploration of self-awareness, acceptance, and personal empowerment.
- Tim Hodges, Ph.D.—A senior consultant at Gallup specializing in organizational performance and workplace engagement, Hodges has extensive experience leading research in strength development, employee selection, and well-being.
- Amy Yip—The Founder of Amy

Yip LLC, a firm dedicated to closing leadership gaps and empowering underrepresented employees to rise into executive roles, Yip seeks to help individuals and teams unlock their full potential through mental fitness and self-confidence training.

• Matthew Lyons—A seasoned yoga practitioner and mindfulness expert who integrates leadership, meditation, and movement to promote balance and self-awareness, Lyons creates an inviting, restorative experience that makes yoga, meditation, and relaxation accessible to all.

• Anthony McLean—A speaker on culture, wellness, and inclusion, delivering research-backed insights to diverse audiences, McLean looks

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## IAEE Welcoming Scholarship, Grant Applications

By Todd McElwee

IAEE is accepting applications for its scholarship and grant programs. The deadline to apply is May 1.

"These scholarship and grant opportunities represent IAEE's ongoing commitment to fostering the next generation of exhibitions and events professionals," said IAEE President & CEO Marsha Flanagan, CEM. "By supporting education and professional development, we are investing in the

future of our industry and helping to create pathways for diverse talent to thrive."

The Helen Brett Scholarship assists individuals exploring the study of exhibitions and events management. IAEE said the scholarship was established by Robert Kolinek, CEM, CMP, and named for his grandmother, Helen Brett, a pioneer in the trade show industry. It aims to promote the exhibitions and events industry by attracting college-level students and

supporting their studies with financial assistance. The initiative is awarded on a competitive basis taking field of study, recommendations and educational achievement into account.

Established by IAEE member Rochelle Richardson, CEM, the IAEE DE&I Scholarship brings visibility to the exhibitions, meetings and business events industry for graduating high school students from diverse backgrounds and underserved communities. Scholarships of up to \$2,500 in

tuition assistance are awarded.

The Bob Dallmeyer Education Fund supports international exhibition and event industry education and professional development. The fund serves event professionals at all stages of their careers. Funding opportunities may include global exchange experiences for programs outside recipients' home countries, education sessions at industry events and CEM learning opportunities.

Find more information at [iaeecom.com](http://iaeecom.com).

# HOTS

**HOTS Nine Lives...** A Los Angeles cat that had been lost since the January 7 wildfires has been reunited with her owner, 82-year-old Katherine Kiefer, Associated Press reports. Aggie, a California Maine coon cat, was missing for two months and feared dead by Kiefer after the fire in L.A.'s Palisades neighborhood reduced her home to ashes. On March 8, Kiefer received a call from the West Los Angeles Animal Shelter that Aggie, who is about 5 years old, had been found. "I was very much worried that I was going to wake up and it had been a dream,"

Kiefer said of her reunion with Aggie. When she was found, Aggie was very thin and needed blood transfusions. Video of the pair's reunion has gone viral on TikTok, and a GoFundMe for Aggie's care has exceeded Kiefer's goal of \$20,000. As of March 13, more than 1,000 people donated \$33,687 to support Aggie's medical bills. HOTS thinks Aggie probably only has eight lives left after reading this story.

✱ ✱ ✱ ✱ ✱

**HOTS Turtle Smuggler...** A Pennsylvania man attempting to catch a flight on March 7 out of Newark Liberty International Airport was caught attempting to smuggle a turtle in his pants through security, according to the federal Transportation Security Administration (TSA). When the body scanner alarm went off, a TSA officer conducted a pat-down search of the unnamed man only to discover "something concealed in the groin area of his pants," the Associated Press reports. That something turned out to be a 5-inch-long red-ear slider turtle wrapped in a blue towel. It is not clear why the man—who, of course, missed his flight after he was escorted



On March 6, Delta Air Lines announced a resolution had been introduced in the Georgia House of Representatives to honor and commemorate Delta's Centennial anniversary. Pictured here: CEO Ed Bastian (left) is joined by Rep. Matt Hatchett, Chair of the House Appropriations Committee, at the Georgia State House in Atlanta.

from the security checkpoint by Port Authority police—was attempting to smuggle the turtle in his pants or if the turtle was his pet, but the turtle was confiscated. "We have seen travelers try to conceal knives and other weapons on their person, in their shoes and in their luggage, however, I believe this

is the first time we have come across someone who was concealing a live animal down the front of his pants," said Thomas Carter, Federal Security Director, New Jersey, TSA. "As best we could tell, the turtle was not harmed by the man's actions." HOTS wants to hear the turtle's side of this story.

## Downtown St. Louis Hotel Closes Abruptly, Removes Guests

By Jordan Bradley

The Last Hotel, a boutique hotel in downtown St. Louis, abruptly closed its doors and kicked guests off the property on March 6.

The closure left more than 100 guests planning to stay at the boutique hotel without accommodations, according to local news outlet FOX 2 Now. Arriving guests with reservations were notified of the closure by a note on the front door of the property that told them to "locate another hotel ASAP."

The Last Hotel's co-owner, Michael Qualizza, publicly announced the property's closure the following day. He said the hotel's approximately 25 employees were terminated, effective immediately, according to *The St. Louis Dispatch*.

"This was a tragedy that could have

been easily avoided," Qualizza said.

The Last Hotel has been at the center of a years-long legal dispute between Qualizza and his business partner and the property's co-owner, Neil Freeman, as well as other lawsuits. In one case, the U.S. Bank, the property's lender, alleged in a lawsuit filed in January 2021 that the pair defaulted on a \$12 million construction loan, according to *The Dispatch*.

In subsequent filings, Qualizza alleged the U.S. Bank conspired against he and Freeman. The U.S. Bank, in turn, alleged Qualizza exhibited "erratic behavior," causing ruptures between himself, Freeman and the bank, according to court documents.

All parties deny the allegations brought against them, and the lawsuit is ongoing.

The March 6 closure of The Last

Hotel was the result of a court order, according to FOX 2, who spoke with an unnamed person identifying themselves as a co-manager.

The Last Hotel opened in 2019 in the historic International Shoe Co. building following a \$54 million redevelopment. The hotel's name is a nod to the building's history of shoemaking, referencing the "last," a tool used in the process. In 2020, the property joined the Unbound Collection by Hyatt Hotels.

Calls to all extensions of the hotel's phone line went unanswered, and its sales and events line voicemail was full when *USAE* called for comment. Qualizza did not return a *USAE* email inquiry requesting comment. Freeman and his lawyers could not be reached for comment.

It is unclear when or if The Last

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## FEMA Employee

continued from page 1

appropriately respond before unlawfully retrieving and publicly disclosing information from a Privacy Act System of Records concerning her termination," according to the lawsuit.

"Under President Trump and Secretary Noem's leadership, DHS will not sit idly and allow deep state activists to undermine the will and safety of the American people," said the DHS on February 11.

Comans' filing noted that the re-

lease's portrayal of herself and the three other fired FEMA employees as "deep state activists" has led third-party organizations and other individuals to incorrectly condemn her actions.

"Additionally, the defendants falsely, deliberately, and publicly portrayed Ms. Comans' actions in such a manner that third parties have asserted her conduct to have been criminal, which is defamation per se, thereby further contributing to the damages she has suffered," the filing said.

Prior to her firing, Comans "was an exemplary employee with absolutely

no disciplinary history" and a record of excellent performance ratings, the filing said.

According to the Associated Press, Musk's claim that \$59 million was spent on luxury hotels for illegal migrants is incorrect. Approximately \$19 million has been spent on reimbursements for hotel costs, according to a New York City spokesperson, Liz Garcia, and those payments did not go to luxury hotels.

Comans has asked a judge to declare that the actions of FEMA and DHS were unlawful and has requested monetary damages.

WEEKLY NEWS  
OF ASSOCIATIONS  
CYBS AND  
HOTELS

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# NEWS

## California Extends Suspension of Short-Term Lodging Limits for L.A. Wildfire Survivors

By Jordan Bradley

California Gov. Gavin Newsom on March 7 announced the state will extend an executive order that suspends short-term lodging regulations for individuals still reeling from the January 7 wildfires in Southern California.

California's state laws classify hotel guests as tenants in most types of hotel properties after 30 days. Newsom's extension suspends that until July 1, allowing impacted individuals "more time to find alternative housing," the governor's office said.

"As the Los Angeles community

**"As the Los Angeles community continues to recover and rebuild, the state remains steadfast in its commitment to providing targeted relief and assistance."**

continues to recover and rebuild, the state remains steadfast in its commitment to providing targeted relief and assistance," said Newsom. "Today I am issuing an executive order to further ensure that survivors are protected from exploitation and can access housing they need."

Initially, Newsom instituted the executive order on January 27 that suspended the short-term lodging laws that limit hotel stays, with the order set to expire on March 8.

At the time of the first executive order, Newsom said without the suspension of the law, hotels, motels, and

other forms of short-term housing could be deterred "from making space available for displaced persons in need of temporary housing beyond 30 days, forcing them to vacate and find alternative shelter."

The California Hotel and Lodging Association (CHLA) spoke out in support of the extension.

"Gov. Newsom's order allows our hotels to continuously shelter individuals, families and pets as the L.A. community continues its long recovery from the devastating wildfires," said Lynn S. Mohrfeld, President and CEO of CHLA. "Removing these obstacles from hotels so they can provide shelter to those who lost their homes is simply the right thing to do."

The executive order also extends price gouging protections on rental housing, hotel and motel rates, "in-

cluding prohibitions on evictions of tenants to relist the rental at a higher rate to July 1, 2025," according to the governor's office.

In addition, the order prioritizes survivors experience homelessness on waiting lists for state-funded housing, and supports rebuilding two commercial corridors in Altadena, a neighborhood in Los Angeles, "to their pre-fire character to support small businesses and rebuild walkable, vibrant community spaces."

According to the governor's office, the wave of wildfires in early Southern California killed 29 people, burned more than 47,900 acres, and damaged more than 16,250 structures, "including homes, small businesses, and places of worship, with initial estimates placing this disaster among the most destructive in California history."

## Defamation Suit

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a local Facebook group, called "WTF Springfield," identifying Thomas Millikin by name, an act that the family's lawyers allege violates Choice's privacy policy.

"If anyone knows Thomas Millikin, tell him he left his cock and ball torture toy in the hotel room he thrashed in Branson last night," Clay wrote.

According to the suit, Clay added in an edit to the post: "I'm not upset that they did kinky shit in a hotel room. I'm pissed cause they thrashed it and stole pretty much everything that they could carry. This EXACT reason is why the rest of Springfield and surrounding areas have to pay a

[deposit] to stay in Branson."

After her initial post, Clay went on to allege that Thomas "trashed" the hotel room and "stole everything that wasn't tied down," including several blankets, a portable hairdryer, and an electrical power strip behind the hotel room's television, according to screenshots of Clay's activities in the group shared with *USAE* by Mark Blankenship, an attorney at Ott Law Firm, the Millikins' lawyers.

However, the filing contends, Clay did not report these thefts to the police, and her post identifying Thomas Millikin by name violated Choice's privacy policy.

"Defendant Choice Hotels, including its agents and employees, promises its customers that it would treat personal information, such as name and credit card information, as

confidential," the suit reads.

And according to the suit, Choice's policy on customer privacy states: "[We] are committed to providing you with an efficient and customized Internet experience...This [policy] describes the information we collect through our websites and personal devices, how we use that information, and how we protect your personally identifiable information. This policy also sets forth our practices for obtaining personal information from other sources, such as written or verbal communications or information collected at a hotel."

The post by Clay has since been deleted, but it had either been seen or commented on by more than 200 people belonging to the community group, the filing states.

The "WTF Springfield" Facebook

group has more than 100,000 members, and as a result of Clay's post, the suit alleges, both Thomas and Alicia Millikin have experienced "severe emotional distress," and the loss of employment and potential employment, respectively.

The suit also alleges that as a result of being falsely portrayed "as someone who performs sexually deviant acts on his own children," Thomas has suffered "medically diagnosable and medically significant emotional distress."

The family is seeking a trial by jury, and \$25,000 from the defendants.

Neither Millikin could be reached for comment, and Choice did not return *USAE* request for comment on the lawsuit by press deadline.

## Vanderpump Hotel

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make it something truly magical."

The Vanderpump Hotel marks the television star and entrepreneur's first foray into hotels and follows the success of her many ventures in wine, spirits and restaurants and lounges such as Vanderpump Cocktail Garden at Caesars Palace, Vanderpump à Paris at Paris Las Vegas, WOLF by Vanderpump at Harveys Lake Tahoe and, most recently, Pinky by Vanderpump at Flamingo Las Vegas.

"We've had a phenomenal partnership with Lisa, developing three very successful restaurants in Las Vegas," said Sean McBurney, Regional President of Caesars Entertainment.

"Now we get to take Lisa's vision and expertise to the next level – infusing her talent and creativity into an entire hotel at the most incredible location on the Las Vegas Strip. Nowhere else in the world can guests experience The Vanderpump Hotel, and we couldn't be more proud to debut it."

Caesars Entertainment said Vanderpump will bring her "stunning aesthetic and distinctive design" to enhance the hotel reception and front desk area, introduce an all-new lounge and redesign the 188 guest rooms and suites. Vanderpump Alain furnishings and lighting fixtures will be featured and, as with other Vanderpump projects, everything will be bespoke and created specifically for the location.

"The Vanderpump Hotel represents the identity behind the name we know and respect—Lisa Vanderpump—whose strong, signature style and passion for hospitality are unmatched," said Terrence O'Donnell, SVP and General Manager of the property. "We couldn't be more excited to collaborate on this unique project that not only transforms our hotel but also changes the Las Vegas Strip."

The property is currently home to Giada De Laurentiis' namesake restaurant GIADA, Bound lobby bar, Interlude casino lounge, Drai's Beachclub and Nightclub, Drai's After Hours and a Caesars Sportsbook.

Additional details on the hotel's renovation will be announced as the project evolves.



Lisa Vanderpump

# NEWS

## IGLTA's Gender Diverse Travel Advisory Group Calls for Greater Inclusivity

By Todd McElwee

Stating that attempts to erase trans/gender diverse people are escalating globally, the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association's (IGLTA) Gender Diverse Travel Advisory Group (GTAG) is urging the travel industry to support promote inclusion and safety for all travelers. The volunteer-led group worked in collaboration with IGLTA and IGLTA Foundation staff.

"With increased visibility often comes pushback, and trans and gender diverse (TGD) travelers continue

to face significant barriers to safe and inclusive travel," said the advisory group. "Many global entities still fail to recognize gender diversity, while others are rolling back protections, reinforcing outdated assumptions that restrict movement for TGD travelers. Reports of barriers at borders—such as invasive screenings, denial of entry, and refusal to recognize an 'X' gender marker designation for nonbinary or intersex people and an aligned gender marker for binary trans people on passports—is just the beginning."

GTAG is asking industry leaders to

take meaningful action by reviewing and updating internal policies to align with best practices for gender inclusivity. It is also advocating for equitable travel experiences by encouraging destinations, hospitality and travel service providers to be gender-inclusive.

"These challenges extend beyond travel and reflect broader societal issues," GTAG said. "However, we believe that travel can be a powerful catalyst for a more inclusive world, and are committed to enabling travel that enriches lives and connects all members of our LGBTQ+ commu-

nity."

On March 27, GTAG will host the "Traveling Beyond Two Sexes: What It Really Means to Create an Inclusive Travel Industry for Trans and Gender Diverse Travelers" webinar to provide insights into best practices and actionable steps for travel professionals to support greater inclusion.

"IGLTA invites the industry to stand with us and support a future where trans and gender-diverse travelers can move through the world freely and safely as their authentic selves," said GTAG.

Find more information at [igлта.org](https://igлта.org).

## U.S. Travel Applauds President on 2026 World Cup Task Force

By Todd McElwee

President Donald Trump is assisting U.S. Travel Association on one of its goals.

On March 7, U.S. Travel applauded the establishment of a White House task force for the 2026 World Cup. The association and its Commission on Seamless and Secure Travel have been calling on lawmakers to prepare the nation for a decade of events.

"The creation of this task force was a top priority for U.S. Travel and will en-

sure the U.S. is fully prepared to host the world's largest sporting event," said U.S. Travel President & CEO Geoff Freeman. "We are grateful for the administration's leadership in bringing together the necessary resources to support the massive influx of travelers, and we are confident this will lay the foundation for a truly transformative mega-decade of events. We look forward to the positive impact this will have on both the travel industry and the nation as a whole."

U.S. Travel said the "critical action"

will ensure a seamless and secure experience for the 8 million visitors the nation could welcome if the right processes for the 2025 Club World Cup and the 2026 World Cup are in place. The task force, chaired by Trump, will coordinate with federal agencies to prepare for these major events and position the United States to welcome the world.

"We're going to be establishing a task force, a very important task force...and that's on the FIFA World Cup of 2026 which is, you know, is

a big event," Trump said, according to CNN. "It's going to be the biggest event, I think."

Co-hosted with Canada and Mexico, the 2026 World Cup is set for June 11–July 19. Domestic host cities include Los Angeles, Seattle, San Francisco Bay Area, Dallas, Houston, Kansas City, Atlanta, Boston, Miami, New York/New Jersey and Philadelphia. WFFA reported the Kay Bailey Hutchinson Convention Center in Dallas will be the official home of FIFA's International Broadcast Center (IBC).

## Destinations International Announces Business Intelligence Certificate Program

By Jonathan Trager

Destinations International (DI) has launched a Business Intelligence Certificate Program designed to empower destination organization professionals with the skills and insights needed to excel in the dynamic world of business events.

Announced on March 11, the program "is tailored specifically for entry-to mid-level professionals in sales, services and marketing who are looking to enhance their understanding of how to strategically apply business intelligence concepts to improve deci-

sion-making and client engagement," according to DI.

"In today's competitive environment, destination professionals must think critically, apply insight and take action. Business intelligence is about understanding how to interpret information and use it effectively in conversations, negotiations and strategic planning," said Don Welsh, President & CEO of DI. "This new certificate program focuses on these concepts and the foundational understandings required in the sales, services and marketing roles, touching on the metrics that

will help the learner adjust and optimize those strategies."

The program is made up of three stand-alone yet interconnected courses, each focused on actionable strategies, applied learning, and industry-specific best practices: Sales, Services, and Marketing and Communications. Each course includes expert-led video modules, knowledge check quizzes, and a final assessment. Participants earn the Business Intelligence Certificate upon completion of all three courses.

"This new certificate program comes at a critical time for destina-

tion professionals, who are facing growing complexity, competition and change across the sales, service and marketing and communications operations in their organizations," said Emily Scheiderer, Sr. Director of Education, Sales & Services for DI. "Destinations International developed this course in response to the needs of our members for essential content and insight delivered in a flexible and accessible format."

For more information, including registration and pricing, visit [destinationsinternational.org/business-intelligence-certificate-program](https://destinationsinternational.org/business-intelligence-certificate-program).

## Georgia Assn. of CVBs Holds Tourism Day at the Capitol

By Jonathan Trager

The Georgia Association of Convention & Visitors Bureaus joined Gov. Brian Kemp and tourism industry professionals from across the state on March 5 to celebrate Tourism Day at the Capitol.

The event returned after a five-year hiatus to recognize the significant impact and importance of Georgia's tour-

ism industry. Kemp was presented with a check by the Georgia Association of Convention & Visitors Bureaus and industry representatives representing the \$5 billion in state and local tax revenue generated by tourism-related expenditures in 2024.

"Tourism plays a vital role in Georgia's economy, providing thousands of jobs, boosting local businesses, and contributing billions in revenue,"

said Amanda Dyson Thornton, Executive Director, Georgia Association of Convention & Visitors Bureaus. "It's not just about visitors; it's about sustaining communities and fostering growth across the state."

Presented by the Georgia Association of Convention & Visitors Bureaus, event sponsors included Georgia's Blue Ridge Fannin County Chamber & CVB, Visit Savannah, Pick Ellijay,

Cartersville Bartow County Tourism, and the Atlanta CVB.

The tourism industry in Georgia accounts for more than 400,000 tourism and hospitality jobs, representing 5% growth year over year. With more than \$40 billion in visitor spending annually reflecting 8% growth from 2022 to 2023, Georgia now ranks fifth in the United States for most visited states for domestic travel.



# NEWS

## Around Associations

By Todd McElwee

### NBAA Urges Congress to fund Air Traffic Control Initiatives...

Earlier this month, National Business Aviation Association (NBAA) President & CEO Ed Bolen urged a congressional aviation subcommittee to fund air traffic control (ATC) system infrastructure and controller hiring and training while also recognizing the critical contribution of industry safety initiatives.

In written testimony submitted for the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure's Subcommittee on Aviation hearing, "America Builds: Air Traffic Control System Infrastructure and Staffing," Bolen noted the country's robust and diverse ATC system is world-leading, but it will only remain so with appropriate funding to modernize infrastructure and hire and train more air traffic controllers, while also expanding on proven industry safety initiatives

including data-sharing programs.

"NBAA's mission is to foster an environment that allows business aviation to thrive," Bolen wrote. "In order to do so, America's National Airspace System (NAS) must be safe, and also be perceived to be safe. The events of the past month have us looking at those tough questions, including: Is air transportation in the U.S. safe today?"

Bolen also shared concern over public response to recent accidents and incidents, in which some have rushed to place blame, rather than allowing the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to complete the investigative process unencumbered by speculation or rumor.

"The foundation on which the aviation community dramatically improved our safety record over the last three decades is the development and implementation of a 'just culture' compliance philosophy,

which encourages reporting errors, analyzing the collected data and learning from mistakes, without fear of retribution," Bolen continued. "Just culture empowers the community to identify and address areas of risk before they become incidents or accidents, and when we jump to conclusions before the investigators' report, we erode that foundation."

Bolen described various safety initiatives and said a variety of data-sharing programs have been key to reducing accident rates and runway incursions in the United States.

NBAA commended the subcommittee for recognizing the importance of funding ATC infrastructure and the controller workforce, adding the association looks forward to collaboratively working to address ATC safety and efficiency to ensure America's aviation system remains the preeminent system in the world.

Find the complete testimony at [nbaa.org](http://nbaa.org).

### AMPs Golf Tournament Coming in April...

On April 30, the Association of Meeting Professionals' (AMPs) Golf Tournament will be held at Old Hickory Golf Course in Woodbridge, Virginia.

More information is available at [ampsweb.org](http://ampsweb.org).

### Registration Open for American Library Association Conference...

The American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference & Exposition is set for June 26–30 in Philadelphia, and registration is now open. "Take your library vision to the next level at the ALA 2025 Annual Conference & Exhibition! Connect with forward-thinking librarians from around the globe and explore new possibilities for the future of libraries. This dynamic event brings together thousands of library professionals and friends of libraries to exchange innovative ideas and turn them into impactful action."

Find more information at [2025.alaannual.org](http://2025.alaannual.org).

## Edwards Retiring

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Greg Edwards

and the National Speech and Debate Tournament; championed projects such as Wells Fargo Arena and the Downtown Hilton convention hotel; served as chairman of Destinations International; reorganized the Des Moines Area Sports & Tourism Commission; and more than tripled convention, sports, and event bookings.

A graduate of the University of Northern Colorado, Edwards joined the CVB in Des Moines after heading up the CVB in Peoria, Illinois. He'd previously been director of marketing for the Overland Park CVB and

worked at Marriott hotels.

Edwards is married with four children. He enjoys doing yard work, golfing, and spending time with family.

Brian Mulcahy, Chair of Catch Des Moines, called Edwards "truly a one-of-a-kind leader, whose infectious energy, passion, and drive leave an indelible mark on everyone he comes into contact with."

"He's Des Moines' biggest cheerleader and his leadership has been transformational for the region," said Mulcahy. "His legacy extends well beyond the boardroom and leaves a lasting impact that has set us up for success heading into this next chapter."

## Montréal Forum

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to equip leaders with practical strategies to foster inclusive workplaces and resilient teams, leaving participants inspired and ready to take action.

"We are thrilled to host ASAE's Executive Leadership Forum in Montréal," said Virginie De Visscher, Executive Director, Business Events, Destination Canada. "With a visionary focus on the future, Montréal is a thriving center of excellence in the digital industries, life sciences and advanced manufacturing. Its kaleidoscope of cultures shines in vibrant art, music, film, dance, food

and fashion, and the many peoples who call this place home mean everyone is welcome. This year's forum is sure to be uplifting and insightful—and we hope ASAE's leaders will feel inspired to return and share this energizing experience with their members."

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

## Hotel Closes

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Hotel will reopen to guests. However, its website and social media pages make no mention of the closure, and hotel rooms are still bookable directly through its website as of March 11.



The Fairmont Washington, D.C., Georgetown unveiled the Nearest Green Suite on March 12 in collaboration with Uncle Nearest Premium Whiskey. The suit was designed in honor of Nearest Green, a formerly enslaved African American distiller who taught Jack Daniels, Founder, Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey Distillery, his process for making whiskey. As part of booking a stay in the suite, guests will receive a bottle of Nearest Green Tennessee Whiskey, signed by Master Blender Victoria Eady Butler, and a signed copy of "Love & Whiskey" written by Uncle Nearest CEO and Founder Fawn Weaver. To book a stay in the Nearest Green Suite or for more information, visit [fairmont.com/washington](http://fairmont.com/washington).



# NEWS

## Small Steps, Big Waves in Atlantic City, NJ



Atlantic City welcomes one and all to our destination, where sustainability meets community spirit, and every gathering is an opportunity to make a positive impact. Through inspiring initiatives that foster connection and purpose, events here leave a lasting impression far beyond the conference room.

Nestled between land and sea, Atlantic City's unique location offers unmatched access to one-third of the nation's population. Our convenient destination allows visitors and attendees to travel by car or fly directly to Atlantic City International Airport or Philadelphia International Airport. Atlantic City is only a train ride away with cost-effective systems like the NJ TRANSIT Rail Service, offering direct travel from Philadelphia to the Atlantic City Convention Center. Upon arrival, the iconic Atlantic City Jitneys, powered by compressed natural gas, provides the most convenient and affordable group transportation. Whether traveling for a conference, meeting, or celebration, Atlantic City ensures effortless transportation.

Leading the way with sustainable and energy-efficient efforts, memorable events begin at the LEED Gold and GBAC STAR-certified Atlantic City Convention Center. Spanning nearly 31 acres with 486,600 square feet of contiguous meeting and convention space, 45 meeting rooms, and a solar array rooftop featuring 13,000 panels, the venue has significantly reduced yearly energy consumption. These sustainable practices, along with eco-conscious initiatives across the destination, reflect Atlantic City's commitment to protecting its unique coastal environment while hosting world-class events.

With over 1.8 million square feet of citywide meeting space, Atlantic City

offers flexible venues to accommodate events of all sizes. From the expansive Atlantic City Convention Center to intimate boardrooms, beachfront and waterfront venues, the destination provides a variety of options that suit any vision. Off-site venues like Renault Winery Resort and Seaview, A Dolce Hotel offer sophisticated and charming settings, from scenic golf courses to rustic vineyards. Atlantic City's unique venues allow you to flex your event, ensuring an unforgettable experience tailored to your needs.

Education is top of mind for Visit Atlantic City with opportunities for innovation and collaboration with destination partners and industry leaders. On an annual basis, we aim to provide a series of client education programs, which provide numerous topics including Atlantic City's sustainability efforts, corporate social responsibility programs, and the newest developments and infrastructures. Our industry partnerships allow Visit Atlantic City to develop content that focuses on our destination's culture and uniqueness.

Atlantic City is committed to regenerative tourism, ensuring that every event and gathering contributes to a brighter, eco-conscious future. The destination leads with impactful citywide initiatives, from beach and city cleanups that preserve diverse wildlife and ecosystems to eco-friendly dining practices. Citywide restaurants and casino resort dining outlets actively participate in the New Jersey Oyster and Clam Recycling Program, which repurposes over 100 tons of shells annually to revitalize local marina ecosystems. By embracing sustainability, Atlantic City continues to create, collaborate, and conserve for a thriving future.

Hosting a meeting in Atlantic City goes

beyond business—it's an opportunity to meet with purpose. Connect with local non-profits through impactful volunteer projects, whether it's supporting the Boys & Girls Club of Atlantic City, empowering women at MudGirls Studios, or helping animals at the Humane Society of Atlantic County. By engaging in these community-driven initiatives, your event fosters connections and inspires action. Visit Atlantic City is committed to serving and empowering the community while proudly supporting local organizations through active volunteerism.

Through ongoing partnerships, the city's casino properties provide diverse avenues for community contribution, ensuring various opportunities for guests to give back during their visit. From collaborating with local businesses in creating exclusive food and beverage items to donating monetary donations to non-profit organizations, Atlantic City's casino resorts are dedicated to providing comprehensive economic support to the community and region.

Atlantic City's authenticity comes alive through its neighborhoods, where art, culture, and community thrive. Throughout the eclectic 48 Blocks program, developed through the Atlantic City Arts Foundation, attendees can discover Atlantic City's diverse neighborhoods, each rich with art, culture, and a history of its own. Spend your day exploring the vibrant cityscape featuring more than 50 murals created by local artists, each with inspiring narratives ready to be explored. The Atlantic City locals continue to lead in our ever-changing destination with missions to celebrate Atlantic City's spirit, which is reflected throughout every neighborhood.

Atlantic City looks forward to working with your group to establish meaningful meetings and conventions before, during, and after your event. Our vibrant city awaits your arrival as we continue to empower a sustainable tomorrow, today. Join us in taking small steps together, creating big waves of innovation and empowerment in Atlantic City, NJ.





# CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

## About Visit Rapid City

Visit Rapid City is at the forefront of a dynamic movement that combines bold strategies, cutting-edge marketing, and impactful sales efforts to draw millions of travelers to the heart of the Black Hills. With a vibrant 53-years history, this Destination Marketing Organization doesn't simply invite visitors—it inspires them. Welcoming more than 4 million annual visitors, the team serves as the voice, vision, and driving force behind the city's flourishing tourism industry. Their mission is to enhance the quality of life in Rapid City by harnessing the power of tourism. From the vibrant Downtown and Main Street Square to the Rapid City Sports Commission, as well as meetings, conferences, and family-friendly adventures, this award-winning DMO is dedicated to bringing to life the long-term vision of a destination that pulses with energy, fueling growth and excitement across the entire region.

## Position Summary

Visit Rapid City is seeking a CEO who is a visionary leader, community champion, and active convener. While the area is known for the famous faces of Mount Rushmore, we are looking for an energetic leader to be known for their ability to collaborate with business, cultural, government, and community partners to define and deliver a rich, authentic experience where natural resources, historical heritage, famous landmarks, and urban pleasures collide. The next CEO of VRC will certainly bring a passion for making an impact through the blend of vibrancy and history found in the City of Presidents.

## Opportunity

The CEO will lead a talented and committed team of 15 and is responsible for an annual budget of nearly \$5M for Visit Rapid City, a 501(c)(6), not-for-profit. The CEO will advance VRC's mission by creating new possibilities for project initiatives, fostering innovation, leveraging resources, and establishing partnerships. Goals, plans, and priorities will be established in concert with the VRC Board of Directors in partnership with the Hotel Business Improvement District (BID) Board of Directors.

For more information and to be considered, please contact Winner Partners at [VisitRapidCity@winnerpartners.net](mailto:VisitRapidCity@winnerpartners.net).



## Education & Experience:

- Bachelor's Degree required with 7-10 years of senior leadership experiences from another DMO of similar scale and complexity; an advanced degree is preferred. Candidates with industry certification such as a CDME (Certified Destination Management Executive) are a plus.
- Genuine passion for positioning Rapid City as a top destination for visitors and businesses nationally and internationally, and positively influencing the future economic vibrancy of the region.
- Ability to attract, engage, develop, and retain top caliber talent by fostering an inclusive, collaborative, results-oriented work environment that empowers staff to accomplish organizational objectives.
- Flexible and creative with an entrepreneurial spirit and demonstrated history of innovation in action.
- Operates with the highest level of integrity, intellectual agility, vision, and positive attitude to motivate and represent all that VRC has to offer.
- Demonstrated experience working effectively with an influential board to advance the regional priorities and achieve impactful outcomes.
- Proven record of treating people with respect and dignity; promotes equity, diversity, and inclusion in all aspects of business and civic life.
- Strong planning, interpersonal, communications, and networking skills.
- Possess expertise on issues relevant to Visit Rapid City to make well-informed and mission-related decisions which command the confidence and respect of stakeholders.