



Marriott International held the 2025 J. Willard Marriott Awards of Excellence event on May 14 to honor exemplary Marriott associates, teams and properties across the world. The winners (pictured here in a cloud of confetti) traveled to the Bethesda Marriott Hotel & Conference Center in Bethesda, Maryland, to attend the ceremony.

## ASAE Announces 2025 Individual Honors for Exceptional Leadership

By Todd McElwee

Recognizing a trio of association professionals for their exemplary support of ASAE and continued contributions to the sector, ASAE announced the 2025 recipients of the Individual Honors for Exceptional Leadership on May 15.

The 2025 honorees include Wendy-Jo Toyama, FASAE, CAE, CEO, American Epilepsy Society, who is this year's Key Award honoree; David "DJ" Johnson, FASAE, CAE, Chief Membership and Engagement Officer, American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, who is the Professional Performance Award honoree; and KiKi L'Italien, Executive Vice President of Marketing and Community Engagement, Big Red M, who is the Academy of Leaders Award honoree.

"Each year, the Individual Honors Committee is inspired by the sheer number of exceptional candidates who are nominated for ASAE's highest individual recognitions," said Clayonia

*Please turn to page 5*

## U.S. to Lose \$12 Billion in International Visitor Spending, WTTC Says

By Jonathan Trager

The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) announced on May 13 its latest Economic Impact Research, which found that the United States is on track to lose a staggering \$12.5 billion in international visitor spending this year.

The organization states that international visitor spending to the United States is projected to fall to just under \$169 billion this year, down from \$181 billion in 2024. This significant shortfall represents a 22.5% decline compared to the previous peak.

The United States is the only country among 184 economies analyzed

by WTTC and Oxford Economics forecast to see international visitor spending decline in 2025, according to the study.

"This is a wake-up call for the U.S. government," said Julia Simpson, President & CEO of WTTC. "The world's biggest Travel & Tourism

*Please turn to page 3*

## MGM Reaches New Agreement with President and CEO

By Jordan Bradley

MGM Resorts International announced on May 8 that it had reached a new employment agreement with President & CEO Bill Hornbuckle, which will see Hornbuckle remain with MGM Resorts through December 31, 2028.

The terms of the agreement also offer Hornbuckle an advisory role to support an integrated resort project in Osaka, Japan, at the end of the employment agree-

ment until the property's grand opening.

"Bill is an exceptional, visionary leader who successfully guided the company through the COVID-19 pandemic while also positioning the business for long-term growth through new digital ventures, strategic M&A opportunities, and expansion into new international markets," said Paul Salem, Chairman of the MGM Resorts Board of Directors.

Hornbuckle joined the

*Please turn to page 4*

## Inside



Page 3

Page 3  
MPI Staging Neuroinclusive  
WEC in St. Louis

Page 4  
Choice Releases 2024  
Sustainability Report

Page 5  
New Jersey Hotel Reduced to  
Rubble in Controlled Demolition

## PhRMA Rejects Trump's Pharmaceutical Executive Order

By Todd McElwee

Stephen J. Uhl, President & CEO, Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), was quick to share the organization's displeasure with President Donald Trump's May 12 Executive Order to enact price controls on prescription drugs similar to those in other countries.

Delivering Most-Favored-Nation Prescription Drug Pricing To American Patients requires that with-

in 30 days Secretary of Health and Human Services Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and other officials shall communicate most-favored-nation price targets to pharmaceutical manufacturers. Such nations are described as "comparably developed countries" although no other detail is specified.

If drug manufacturers fail to offer most-favored-nation pricing, Kennedy has been directed to propose rules that im-

*Please turn to page 4*





# Where Business Meets the Waterfront

Greater Fort Lauderdale puts everything within reach—just minutes from the airport, beaches, and vibrant Las Olas dining and shops. At the center is the reimagined Convention Center, featuring a stunning waterfront ballroom, tropical plaza, and the new Omni Fort Lauderdale hotel steps away.



[visitlauderdale.com/meetings-and-groups/](https://visitlauderdale.com/meetings-and-groups/)





HOTS

*HOTS Cat Quinceañera... Celebration of a cat's 15th birthday saved a Houston animal rescue group, UPI reported. Houston-resident Miranda Gonzalez celebrated her 15-year-old white cat, Holly Marie, with a traditional Mexican rite of passage that celebrates a child's 15th birthday. According to UPI, Gonzalez knew she wanted to hold one such event for Holly Marie ever since she got the cat as a kitten to "celebrate our life together and show everyone my love for her!" She began the planning for the event a year in advance. "It took me months to plan," Gonzalez said. "I had friends and family padrinos, which are*

*people who donate and help with the event. It was very detail-oriented." The quinceañera also acted as a fundraiser for Houston's Almost Home Cat Haven, and when videos from the event went viral, donations to the rescue increased dramatically, UPI reports. "It has been a ride all week long. We have been blessed beyond," said Deena Ulrich, managing director of the rescue. "Every time we think 'I don't know if I can keep doing this,' some blessing will drop in. And this time it was Miranda, her family and Holly's blessed day she got to have." Ulrich said the donations took the rescue from the brink of closing to financial stability. HOTS loves a party, but especially loves this party.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*HOTS 70K Suckers... A Kentucky mom was absolutely gobsmacked when 22 boxes containing 70,000 Dum-Dum lollipops showed up on her doorstep earlier this month, the Huffington Post reports. Holly LaFavers- 8-year-old son, Liam, ordered the lollipops while playing on her phone. Though she tried to stop the approximately \$4,000 delivery, she was too late, according to the news source. "He told me that he wanted to have a carnival, and he was ordering*



On May 8, the Nashville CVC celebrated Nashville's tourism industry with 700+ hospitality partners at the Nashville Hospitality Industry Annual Luncheon in downtown Nashville. Dolly Parton was honored with the E.W. "Bud" Wendell Award for her contributions to Nashville's hospitality industry. Left to right: Dr. Bob Fisher, former President, Belmont University; Deana Ivey, President & CEO, Nashville CVC; Parton; and Nashville Mayor Freddie O'Connell. Courtesy of Nashville CVC

*the Dum-Dums as prizes for his carnival," LaFavers said. "Again, he was being friendly, he was being kind to his friends." After some phone calls and working with the banks, LaFavers received a refund from Amazon for the DumDums. LaFavers has since*

*updated her phone settings to ensure that Liam doesn't order the tent and clown costumes for this carnival next, she said. HOTS thinks this is both wild and adorable—and why child-lock settings were invented for smartphones.*

MPI Staging Neuroinclusive WEC in St. Louis

By Todd McElwee

Recognizing and celebrating that not all brains are wired the same way, MPI's World Education Congress (WEC) will feature a menu of options for both neurotypical and neurodivergent attendees. WEC is June 18–20 in St. Louis.

"At Meeting Professionals International, we recognize and celebrate that not all brains are wired the same way, and that diversity in the ways our community members think and perceive the world makes us all smarter and our businesses more successful," the association said. "At WEC St. Louis, we are committed to fostering an inclu-

sive environment that welcomes and supports both neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals. We recognize the importance of conscious inclusion, acknowledge that this is just the beginning of our journey and commit to ongoing learning and improvement."

WEC will feature a Quiet Room, Wordly transcription and translation and the option to view general sessions in smaller spaces. The Quiet Room will come equipped with comfortable seating, soft lighting and minimal noise to foster a soothing atmosphere. This space is intended for those who need a moment of respite away from the sensory stimuli of the event. Eye masks, ear

plugs, weighted shawls, fidget toys and coloring books are available to promote tranquility.

"We encourage all attendees to utilize the Quiet Room whenever they feel the need for a quiet retreat," MPI said. "Our commitment to creating an inclusive and supportive environment extends to providing this dedicated space for mental and emotional wellbeing. Inside the quiet room, you will find the following items designed to help ease sensory processing and overload, mask background noise, reduce stress and anxiety and block visual stimuli."

WEC St. Louis will offer de-

Please turn to page 5

WTTC

continued from page 1

economy is heading in the wrong direction, not because of a lack of demand, but because of a failure to act. While other nations are rolling out the welcome mat, the U.S. government is putting up the 'closed' sign."

Prior to the pandemic in 2019, international visitors generated \$217.4 billion in revenue and supported almost 18 million jobs across America, WTTC noted.

WTTC noted that in 2024, nearly 90% of all tourism spending came

from domestic travel, but added that "this heavy reliance on home grown tourism is masking a serious vulnerability; the international market is where the real growth lies, and the U.S. is losing its crown."

Simpson called for the federal government to take "urgent action to restore international traveller confidence."

"It could take several years for the U.S. just to return to pre-pandemic levels of international visitor spending, not even the peak from 10 years ago," she said. "This is about growth in the U.S. economy—it is doable, but it

needs leadership from D.C."

Geoff Freeman, President & CEO of U.S. Travel, concurred with the WTTC's position.

"Current data tells us that we must be more welcoming, starting today," said Freeman. "Our messaging and our policies must encourage, not deter, international travelers from visiting the U.S. With global events like the World Cup, Ryder Cup and America's 250th birthday on the horizon, there is a need for urgent action."

For more information, visit [researchhub.wttc.org](https://researchhub.wttc.org).

WEEKLY NEWS  
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# NEWS

## Choice Hotels Releases 2024 Sustainability Report

By Jordan Bradley

Choice Hotels International on May 12 released its annual sustainability report, releasing some sets of data for the first time his year.

Choice published greenhouse gas emissions data of Scope 3 emissions—which are third-party emissions that are “the result of activities from assets not owned or controlled by the reporting organization, but that the organization indirectly affects,” according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Efforts for the hotel company in 2024 included reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and creating efficiencies to save franchise hotel owners’ time and money, said Patrick Pacious, CEO of Choice, and focused on a “refreshed” approach to human trafficking prevention company-wide.

“At Choice Hotels, we are dedicated to building a better tomorrow, today,

by integrating sustainable practices across our business,” said Megan Brumagim, Vice President, Upscale Brands and Chief Sustainability Officer for Choice Hotels International.

Some notable shifts in 2024 mentioned in Choice’s annual sustainability report also include the exclusive use of 100% cage-free egg products and crate-free pork at all-day restaurants at Choice-managed hotels, and the installation of three beehives at Choice’s corporate headquarters in North Bethesda, Maryland.

In 2024, Choice launched an AI-supported food program that monitors food waste with the purpose of reducing waste in Choice-managed hotels, according

to the report, and contributed company data to the Carbon Disclosure Project’s Climate and Water surveys for the first time in 2024.

“Our 2024 Sustainability Report highlights our commitment to reducing our environmental footprint and

driving long-term value for hotel owners,” Brumagim said. “We are proud of the progress we’ve made and remain energized to continue our journey towards a more sustainable tomorrow.”

In conjunction with the release of the 2024 Sustainability Report, Choice announced a new partnership with the National Park Foundation. Through the collaboration, Choice said it will donate \$150,000 annual donation to launch a new feature that allows members of Choice’s loyalty program, Choice Privileges, to convert points into donations to the foundation.

Choice said the partnership will also allow the company to contribute to the foundation’s “mission of supporting and enhancing America’s national parks for present and future generations.”

Choice was also recognized in Newsweek’s list of “America’s Most Responsible Companies” in 2025, “underscoring Choice Hotels’ dedication to making a positive global impact through its various sustainability initiatives,” Choice said.

To see the full report, visit [investor.choicehotels.com](https://investor.choicehotels.com).

**“Our 2024 Sustainability Report highlights our commitment to reducing our environmental footprint and driving long-term value for hotel owners,” Brumagim said.**

## Exhibitions & Conferences Alliance Applauds House Bills

By Jonathan Trager

The Exhibitions & Conferences Alliance (ECA), which represents the business and professional events industry, has expressed support for legislation from the U.S. House of Representatives that it says “will strengthen the competitiveness of the industry going forward.”

Two bills from the Committee on Ways & Means and Committee on Education & the Workforce would maintain several ECA-supported tax policies while creating two new workforce

development pathways, ECA noted on May 14. The bills are advancing as part of the ongoing Congressional budget reconciliation process.

The House Committee on Ways & Means’ “One Big, Beautiful Bill” would retain the current tax treatment of business profits, private investments, and association events, while transforming Section 529 college savings programs into career savings programs by paying for certain licenses and certifications.

The House Committee on Education  
*Please turn to page 7*

## Hornbuckle

*continued from page 1*

company in 1998, according to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, and has served as President of MGM Resorts since 2012, according to MGM Resorts. In 2019, Hornbuckle also became Chief Operating Officer.

He took on the role of acting president and CEO of the company in March 2020 after the departure of then-Chairman and CEO Jim Murren, earning the official title of president and CEO in July the same year, according to the *Review-Journal*.

“I am honored to continue leading

this company at an exciting time of both digital growth and resort expansion in places like New York, Japan, Brazil and the Middle East. Our best days remain in front of us, and I’m thankful to our Board for their continued trust and support,” said Hornbuckle.

In his current role, Hornbuckle manages all aspects of MGM Resorts’ strategy, operations and development projects, global development efforts and its digital gaming strategy, MGM said.

“The success we’ve enjoyed over the last five years is a testament to our leadership team and our employees who have embraced our culture of guest-centricity and continuous improvement,” Hornbuckle said. “Together, we will continue to pursue our vision to be the world’s premiere gaming entertainment company.”

Hornbuckle is a member of MGM Resorts’ Board of Directors. He also serves as Co-Chairman of the Board of Directors of MGM China Holdings and as Chair of the U.S. Travel Association.

“Bill has earned the trust, respect and admiration of his employees, peers, shareholders and this Board,” Salem said. “We’re thrilled that he has agreed to remain in his role for the foreseeable future.”

## PhRMA

*continued from page 1*

pose those rates and take other aggressive measures to significantly reduce the cost of prescription drugs to the American consumer and end anticompetitive practices.

“To lower costs for Americans, we need to address the real reasons U.S. prices are higher: foreign countries not paying their fair share and middlemen driving up prices for U.S. patients,”

Ubl said. “The Administration is right to use trade negotiations to force foreign governments to pay their fair share for medicines. U.S. patients should not foot the bill for global innovation.

“The U.S. is the only country in the world that lets [pharmacy benefits managers] PBMs, insurers and hospitals take 50% of every dollar spent on medicines. The amount going to middlemen often exceeds the price in Europe. Giving this money directly to patients will lower their medicine costs and significantly reduce the gap with European prices.”

The president said: “The United States has for too long turned its back on Americans, who unwittingly

sponsor both drug manufacturers and other countries. These entities today rely on price markups on American consumers, generous public subsidies for research and development primarily through the National Institutes of Health, and robust public financing of prescription drug consumption through Federal and State healthcare programs.”

PhRMA has publicly advocated against PBMs via a series of multimedia communications, including television and radio advertisements. In its 2025 Policy Agenda, the association detailed how the “middlemen” are driving up costs, including favoring higher list price medicines over lower-priced brands, steering patients to pharmacies they own, and forcing stable patients to switch drugs for non-medical reasons.

Ubl concluded: “Importing foreign prices from socialist countries would be a bad deal for American patients and workers. It would mean less treatments and cures and would jeopardize the hundreds of billions our member companies are planning to invest in America – threatening jobs, hurting our economy and making us more reliant on China for innovative medicines.”



Bill Hornbuckle

Credit: R. Marsh Starks/UNLV Creative Services



# NEWS

## New Jersey Hotel Reduced to Rubble in Controlled Demolition

By Jordan Bradley

It took just 30 seconds and several explosions for the Sheraton Crossroads Hotel in Mahwah, New Jersey, a 25-story glass hotel, to crumble to the ground in a controlled demolition the morning of May 10. The event drew hundreds of local spectators.

The hotel first opened in October 1987. During its 36-year lifespan, the Sheraton Crossroads Hotel was considered a landmark in the area, standing out along Route 17. Until its demolition day, the hotel was the tallest building in Mahwah, according to local reports.

The Sheraton Crossroads Hotel was known for hosting weddings, community events such as fashion shows and Mahwah Regional Chamber of Commerce meetings, and the women's Tennis Classic.

Jim Wysocki, Mahwah Township's mayor, in a May 12 Facebook post shared photos of the aftermath of the demolition, and noted how integral the hotel had been in community members' lives over its lifespan.

"The beautiful building stood tall and proud and welcomed us for many

celebrations. Many of us attended special occasions there such as proms and weddings," Wysocki wrote. "We also attended many happy hours and late-night dancing at Illusions. No matter what reason, the building welcomed us and showed us a good time. The Mahwah Sheraton Crossroads lived up to the true meaning of Mahwah, it was a welcoming sight and a meeting place for all."

The hotel had been permanently closed since December 2023. Prior to demolition, the building was gutted and hazardous materials—including asbestos—were removed, according to [northjersey.com](http://northjersey.com), a local news outlet.

Wysocki also noted the "historic" nature of the event, though the plan to redevelop the site has not yet been finalized.

"Thank you, residents, for understanding and being patient with the magnitude of this project. The demolition is step one in developing a future that we can all be proud of,"



The Sheraton Crossroads Hotel in Mahwah, New Jersey, was demolished on May 10. Photo from Mahwah Township Facebook



Wysocki said.

The township's former mayor, Bill Laforet, attended the event and echoed Wysocki's sentiment in a Facebook post, saying: "Times change and progress prevails. This landmark will hopefully be replaced by some thoughtful development in Mahwah which will make our community proud."

In August 2024, the Mahwah Township Council approved a proposal from Crossroads Hotel Developers, the Sheraton Crossroads Hotel's owner, to expand the hotel site's building allowance from 1.7 million square feet to 4 million. The company has not

yet offered a development plan to the public for the site, according to [northjersey.com](http://northjersey.com).

Despite the destruction and rubble, Mahwah's Township Council President Robert Ferguson said he believes the demolition is a sign of progress for the area.

"Demolishing the structure isn't about erasing the past, it's about honoring it by making room for progress," Ferguson said in an interview with [northjersey.com](http://northjersey.com). "This will bring hundreds of jobs to the area and drive business to Mahwah's local shops and restaurants without burdening our schools or infrastructure."

## ASAE Award

continued from page 1

Colbert-Dorsey, U.S. Director and Secretary of the Board, World Eye Cancer Hope, and Chair of the ASAE Individual Honors Committee. "The depth of experience, leadership and service represented in this year's pool of applicants made our deliberations both challenging and deeply rewarding. Collectively, this year's recipients exemplify the spirit of service, innovation and values-driven leadership that ASAE strives to celebrate through these awards."

Toyama is the 80<sup>th</sup> recipient of the Key Award, which is presented to chief staff executives of associations who demonstrate exceptional qualities of leadership and a deep commitment to voluntary membership organizations.

In addition to her leadership at AES, Toyama is the co-founder and 2025 chair of ASAE's Asian American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander (AANHPI) Association Community, which aims

to increase AANHPI participation and advancement in the association profession. Toyama received the 2024 Association Forum Woman of Influence Award.

"I'm incredibly honored to receive the Key Award, and I stand on the shoulders of the many giants who have come before me," Toyama told *USAE*. "It's especially meaningful to be recognized during Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month as the first Asian woman to receive this award, and knowing I won't be the last. Service has always been one of my core values and I've been fortunate to spend my career giving back to the community while doing what I love. I look forward to continuing this work and making meaningful change."

Johnson is the 51<sup>st</sup> recipient of the Professional Performance Award, which recognizes important contributions made by association executives who are at the top level in their organizations but do not serve in the role of CEO.

Johnson served as Vice Chair (2019-2020) and Chair (2020-2021) of the Certified Association Executive (CAE) Commission and is an alumnus of ASAE's Diversity Executive Leadership Program (DELP). He was previously an executive at the American Society of Interior Designers – ASID and Association of Women's Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses (AWHONN).

L'Italien is the 38<sup>th</sup> recipient of the Academy of Leaders Award, which is presented to consultants or industry partners who have demonstrated exemplary support of ASAE and the association community.

At Big Red M, L'Italien helps associations increase revenue and relevance

Please turn to page 7



David "DJ" Johnson



KiKi L'Italien



Wendy-Jo Toyama

## MPI

continued from page 3

vice-based, real-time transcription and translation to enhance inclusivity and accessibility via Wordly. Audio and text-based deliveries in a variety of languages are available.

Concerning the general sessions, organizers said: "Traditional general

session rooms can be a crowded, loud and unwelcoming environments for some of our participants. We will be streaming the general sessions into the bonfire area just outside of our plenary room so that you can experience them in a quieter and more peaceful environment."

Find more at [wec.mpi.org](http://wec.mpi.org).



# NEWS

## Hilina D. Ajakaiye Joining NCBMP as Chief Strategy Officer

By Todd McElwee

Hilina D. Ajakaiye, CDME, and the National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals (NCBMP) are pushing forward.

On June 2, the tenured meetings industry executive will take over the newly created role of Chief Strategy Officer overseeing NCBMP's strategic transformation initiatives while focusing on operational scalability, revenue growth, and enhanced member value.

Ajakaiye's resume features a five-year tenure as Executive Vice President of Meet Boston. NCBMP said her leadership helped launch TheBOS,

Boston's first mobile visitor information center. She also spearheaded the "All Inclusive Boston" campaign—an award-winning initiative that reshaped the city's tourism brand, leading to a 400% increase in web traffic and 1.1 million social media impressions.

In 2023, Meet Boston transitioned from a traditional membership model to a partnership model under her direction, increasing inclusivity while driving a 25% boost in revenue. Ajakaiye also mobilized the Meet Boston Foundation to enhance community engagement and elevate the visitor experience through cultural tourism.

Jason Dunn, Sr., CEO of NCBMP,

said: "As we navigate the next chapter of growth in an increasingly complex and interconnected global economy, the need for strategic clarity and operational scalability has never been more critical. To compete at a global level, we must align the board's long-term vision with emerging technologies and internal infrastructure demands. Hilina's proven track record of transformative growth in the hospitality industry and her powerful voice for positive change makes her the ideal leader for this moment. This is a people-centered business. Hilina's knack for connection and emotional intelligence will strengthen meaningful collaborations across the entire meetings and events industry."

Ajakaiye directed comprehensive workforce development initiatives that created tailored training programs through the newly formed Partner Academy, empowering individuals from diverse backgrounds to build careers in hospitality and tourism. Simultaneously, her supplier diversity initiative expanded Meet Boston's network to intentionally include women, minority, and veteran-owned outfits.

"On behalf of the City of Boston, I am proud to see the addition of a local partner, friend, and community leader like Hilina Ajakaiye to the National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals," said Segun Idowu, City of Boston Chief of Economic Opportunity and Inclusion for Mayor Michelle Wu. "Hilina has been an incredible force for good on the ground in a changing Boston, and has been a key driver of the expansion of the city's image to be more inclusive,



Hilina D. Ajakaiye

welcoming, and accessible. I know she will bring an extensive record of accomplishment to NCBMP, and we are certainly looking forward to continuing our deep partnership with her as we work together to bring more diverse events to this new majority city."

NCBMP said the appointment reaffirms its commitment to visionary leadership at a transformative moment in the meetings and hospitality industry.

"As a first-generation Ethiopian immigrant who arrived in the U.S. in 1987, Ajakaiye brings a deeply personal understanding of how travel and tourism can break down barriers and create pathways to economic opportunity," the association said. "Her leadership philosophy, rooted in innovation, collaboration, and community-driven economic development, exemplifies NCBMP's vision for an industry where access and opportunity enable sustainable, scalable growth."

## Destinations International Announces 2025–2026 HBCU and Hospitality Scholarships

By Jonathan Trager

Destinations International (DI) on May 14 announced the new class of recipients for the DI Foundation Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) and Hospitality Scholarship.

Eleven students will each receive \$8,000 for the 2025–2026 academic year to support their studies in hospitality and tourism management. In addition, each recipient will be given opportunities to engage with DI members through professional development, mentorship, networking and hands-on learning throughout the academic year, including attending the 2025 DI Annual Convention.

DI noted the HBCU and Hospitality Scholarship was first envisioned by past DI Chair Al Hutchinson, President & CEO of Visit Baltimore, saying his "commitment to expanding access and opportunity for students laid the groundwork for a program that is transforming lives and elevating the future of the destination industry," the organization stated.

"This scholarship program exists today because of the vision and leadership of one of our industry's strongest advocates for equity and representation," said Don Welsh, President & CEO of DI. "Al Hutchinson's passion for mentorship and inclusion helped catalyze this effort, and we're proud to continue building on that foundation. The future success of our industry requires a workforce that reflects our members' communities and visitors."

This year's recipients include:

- Kimberly Berduo-Velasquez, Delaware State University
- Nicolette Conserve, Morgan State

University

- Emma Crowe, Delaware State University
- Nyjaiha DeBourg, Morgan State University
- Tyra Dunnaway, Bethune Cookman University
- John James, Morgan State University
- Emarie McNair, Delaware State University
- Courtney Stanback, Morris Brown College
- Kamryn Taylor-Corley, Delaware State University
- Nancy Villalta, University of the District of Columbia
- Jazmen C. Wilkerson, Morgan State University

The 2025–2026 HBCU Scholars are the largest class since the program was launched in 2023 and represent the future of the travel and tourism industry, according to DI. To date, the DI Foundation has raised more than \$300,000 from donors across the industry to support the program's growth.

"As the tourism and hospitality industry navigates labor shortages and a shifting cultural landscape, workforce development is a top strategic priority," said Amir Eylon, DI Foundation Chair and President & CEO of Longwoods International. "The scholarship program directly addresses barriers to entry for emerging talent while helping destination organizations grow a more diverse, skilled and resilient leadership pipeline."

More information on scholarship recipients and the scholarships is at [destinationsinternational.org](https://destinationsinternational.org).



The Courtyard Atlanta Duluth Downtown, owned by Southeastern Real Estate Group and by LBA Hospitality was awarded the Diamond Circle Award by Marriott International, LBA announced on May 13. The award recognizes top-performing hotels in Marriott's Select Brands portfolio of properties. The Courtyard's General Manager, Joshlyn Villa (pictured left with the hotel's Director of Sales, Melissa Sloan), accepted the award on behalf of the hotel at a recent Marriott Select Brands Owner & Franchisee CONNECT Conference in Nashville, Tennessee, in early May.



# NEWS

## Hotel del Coronado Announces New GM, Wraps Up Six-Year Renovation

By Jordan Bradley

The historic Hotel del Coronado on Coronado Island near San Diego announced on May 13 the appointment of Marco Tabet as the property's new General Manager following a six-year property-wide renovation.

In a LinkedIn post announcing the appointment, the Hotel del Coronado said Tabet's "extensive background across luxury Hilton properties worldwide brings invaluable expertise as The Del enters its next chapter."

Tabet is a seasoned hotel executive with more than 20 years of hospitality experience. Most recently, he served as general manager of Conrad Punta de Mita in Nayarit, Mexico. Prior to that, he served as general manager at several Hilton properties, including

Hilton Los Cabos, Hilton Lima Miraflores in Lima, Peru, and the Waldorf Astoria Panama in Panama City, Panama, Hilton said.

"Tabet's commitment to enhancing guest experiences and his versatility in the hospitality industry will undoubtedly contribute to maintaining the high standards of service and excellence at Hotel del Coronado. Since 2019, the property has been undergoing a massive \$550 million renovation, restoration and transformation project funded and spearheaded by its New York-based owner Blackstone Real Estate. With the project wrapping up this June, Tabet's new role will take on the job of capitalizing on the renovations and further elevating the status of the property.

The 750-room hotel opened in 1888

and has been an iconic stay for Hollywood stars over the years, including Marilyn Monroe, Charlie Chaplin and Judy Garland. The Hotel del Coronado was designated as a National Historic Landmark in 1977 and was inducted into the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Historic Hotels of America in 2018.

Renovations to the property include 75 new residential-style accommodations, new dining experiences including the recently-opened Nobu restaurant, the Ice House museum, a reinvigorated spa, expanded fitness facilities and new retail concepts.

The Hotel del Coronado is comprised of hotel neighborhoods. Portions of the property are members of the Curio Collection by Hilton, including The Cabanas, The Views and The Victorian, which are in the process of completing a \$160 million renovation. Other



Marco Tabet

portions of the property—Shore house at The Del and Beach Village at The Del—are part of LCR Hotels & Resorts' portfolio.

## National Restaurant Association Restaurant, Hotel-Motel Show, Running in Chicago

By Todd McElwee

Things are cooking in Chicago with the National Restaurant Association Restaurant, Hotel-Motel Show, being staged at McCormick Place from May 17–20. In 2024, The Show attracted more than 58,000 foodservice professionals representing 124 countries.

The Show is owned and operated by Informa in partnership with the National Restaurant Association.

"The Show stands as the central gathering place for our industry, where creativity, ingenuity, and opportunity converge," said Tom Cindric, President of Exhibitions, Informa Connect Foodservice Group. "The true value of the 2025 Show lies in its power to spark fresh thinking and present a full range of solutions, encompassing everything from emerging technologies to novel culinary concepts, that equip foodservice professionals to not just respond to current conditions, but to proactively shape what's next for their businesses and the industry. There's simply no better place to experience the energy and evolution of foodservice."

Encompassing north of 700,000 square feet of exhibit space, the Show will feature more than 2,200 exhibitors, including over 800 debuting companies. Complementing the main Show floor are six specialty pavilions offering focused content:

A Taste of the States, The Beverage Room, Global Food Expo, Organic & Natural Pavilion, TECH Pavilion, and Emerging Brands Pavilion.

The keynote presentation features chef, author, and TV host Carla Hall. She'll detail her journey from accountant to chef and TV personality. A full slate of educational programming is also on tap.

Additional features include presentation of the Food and Beverage (FABI) and Kitchen Innovations (KI) Awards, various culinary demonstrations, live podcast booth and a series of Dinner Experiences presented by Uber Eats, providing attendees with curated dining opportunities at select Chicago restaurants.

"For over a century, the Show has united the foodservice industry—from independent operators and global chains to chefs, suppliers, and innovators—to explore emerging trends, sample new products, and influence the industry's future," said Julie Franks, a public relations officer from mdg, A Freeman Company, on the event's website. "As the sector navigates ongoing shifts like economic pressures, evolving consumer preferences, and the need for technology integration, the 2025 Show provides a vital platform to identify actionable strategies, source advanced products, and build strategic partnerships."

Find the full menu of activities at [nationalrestaurantshow.com](https://nationalrestaurantshow.com).

## House Bills

*continued from page 4*

& the Workforce's "Student Success and Taxpayer Savings Plan" would expand the Pell Grant program to pay for high-quality short-term skilled workforce training for the first time.

"The House of Representatives has taken two big steps forward toward ensuring our industry's collective ability to drive economic growth, support

job creation, and empower small businesses into the future," said Tommy Goodwin, Executive Vice President of ECA. "These issues will be front and center on ECA Legislative Action Day on May 29, where industry leaders and advocates will encourage Congress to keep the positive momentum going."

For more information about ECA's tax reform and future workforce policy priorities, visit

[exhibitionsconferencesalliance.org](https://exhibitionsconferencesalliance.org).

## ASAE Award

*continued from page 5*

through strategy, branding, and community-driven marketing. She's also Editor-in-Chief of Association Chat, a media platform that includes a digital and print quarterly magazine, podcast, newsletter, online community, and live events. She is a recipient of the 2024 AWTC Technology Champion Award.

"For years, I've watched people I admire receive this award and never

imagined I might be among them," L'Italien told USAE. "To be recognized in this way feels incredibly meaningful. I'm deeply grateful to the mentors, collaborators, and friends who've supported and inspired me along the way. This honor is as much about them as it is about me and I'm truly thankful."

The Individual Honors for Exceptional Leadership will be presented during the 2025 ASAE Annual Meeting & Exposition, which will be held from August 9–12 in Los Angeles.

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# NEWS

## Find the Perfect Blend of Productivity and Relaxation in Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach

Imagine stepping out of a morning strategy session in a cutting-edge facility and walking straight into a refreshing coastal breeze, where the scent of salt air mingles with the aroma of freshly grilled Gulf shrimp from a dockside café. Just ahead, a heron wades gracefully in the shallows while dolphins frolic in the shimmering waters of Charlotte Harbor. Welcome to Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach, a meeting destination that offers the perfect blend of productivity and relaxation.

### A Meeting Destination Like No Other

Nestled on Florida's Southwest Gulf Coast, this charming waterfront region is a place where attendees can begin the day with an inspiring keynote overlooking the harbor and then wind down with a sunset cruise or a round of golf. Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach isn't just a location—it's an experience where the beauty, flavors, and adventure of the water enrich every meeting, retreat, or conference.

### Exceptional Meeting Venues

From intimate executive retreats to large-scale conferences, Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach offers venues that combine functionality with unforgettable scenery.

For large gatherings, the Charlotte Harbor Event & Conference Center is the top choice. Situated in the heart of downtown Punta Gorda, this 44,000-square-foot waterfront venue features a grand 20,000-square-foot exhibition hall, several breakout rooms, and a beautiful outdoor terrace ideal for networking receptions. Equipped with state-of-the-art audiovisual technology and adaptable layouts, it serves a range of events, from corporate conferences to trade shows. Most im-

portantly, attendees can step outside and explore Punta Gorda's historic district, where waterfront restaurants, boutiques, and cultural attractions are just a short walk away.

For those seeking luxury and exclusivity, Sunseeker Resort Charlotte Harbor is a game-changer. Set to redefine high-end events, this sophisticated resort features 785 rooms and 60,000 square feet of elegant indoor and outdoor event spaces, along with a private golf course for networking in the Florida sunshine. Host a morning leadership session with views of the harbor, then reward attendees with a spa retreat or a private culinary experience showcasing the Gulf's freshest seafood. For more intimate gatherings, Palm Island Resort offers a secluded beachfront setting, perfect for executive retreats and team getaways—with island charm and personalized service at every turn.

### Beyond the Boardroom

One of the most amazing benefits of hosting an event in Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach is that work doesn't feel like work—it feels like an opportunity to connect, recharge, and experience something new.

### A Vibrant Arts Scene Worth Exploring

Attendees can take a break and explore the area's vibrant arts scene. Stroll through the Peace River Botanical & Sculpture Gardens, where contemporary art merges with lush greenery, or visit the cozy Hatch Gallery, a hidden gem that showcases local talent. Don't miss the Sea Grape Gallery in downtown Punta Gorda—an artist-owned co-op featuring a diverse collection of fine art, photography, pottery, and jewelry created by regional artists and selected guest artists.



Boating excursions are just one of many outdoor activities your group can enjoy.

### Discover Nature's Playground

For those who favor fresh air over fluorescent lighting, Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach is an outdoor paradise. Kayak along nearly 200 miles of Blueway Trails, where winding mangroves lead to hidden estuaries teeming with wildlife. Borrow a complimentary loaner bike and ride the scenic Punta Gorda Harborwalk, a waterfront path lined with swaying palms and breathtaking views. Alternatively, explore Alligator Park Preserve, where nature trails offer opportunities to encounter Florida's native wildlife.

### Unwind on Englewood's Pristine Shores

Although meeting spaces are situated inland, a pre- or post-conference stay provides the ideal opportunity to enjoy the sugar-white sands of Englewood Beach or Stump Pass Beach State Park. Unwind after a productive event with a peaceful beach stroll, search for fossilized shark teeth (a cherished local tradition!), or soak in the Gulf breeze. Longing for something more energetic? Try paddleboard yoga—where the water transforms into your floating studio.

### Fresh Seafood, Craft Cocktails, and Good Vibes

Dining in Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach is as much about the atmosphere as the flavors. The area is renowned for dockside seafood, craft cocktails, and a laid-back vibe that makes every meal a pleasure.

For an upscale executive dinner, The Perfect Caper is a must-visit. It features elegant dishes such as lobster ravioli and filet mignon, complemented by an award-winning wine selection. If the group prefers a more casual, toes-in-the-sand experience, Lock 'N Key Restaurant & Pub delivers with fresh grouper sandwiches and stunning

waterfront views, perfect alongside a round of margaritas.

For a truly unique experience, host a team dinner at Farlow's on the Water, where Caribbean flavors blend with Southern hospitality in a lush garden setting. Or, head to Laishley Crab House, a local favorite where guests can enjoy cracking open steaming stone crab claws while taking in the views of Charlotte Harbor.

The best part? Many restaurants in Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach offer private dining rooms and catering services, making it easy to plan unforgettable meals tailored to your event.

### Planning Made Simple

With so much to offer, planning a meeting in the destination may seem overwhelming—but it doesn't have to be. The Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach Visitor & Convention Bureau is here to assist, providing free planning services, personalized site visits, and insider tips to ensure your event goes off without a hitch.

Need an off-site excursion to wow your attendees? They'll coordinate eco-tours, deep-sea fishing charters, sunset cruises, and more. Looking for a group-friendly restaurant? They'll offer tailored recommendations that match your event's vibe.

### Where Productivity Meets Paradise

In Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach, meetings don't just happen within four walls—they unfold on the water, at the golf course, during sunset cocktails, and around tables brimming with fresh seafood. So, why settle for the ordinary when you can provide your group with an extraordinary experience? Start planning today at [purefloridameetings.com](http://purefloridameetings.com) and discover a destination where productivity meets paradise.



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