



Visit Seattle President CEO & President Tammy Canavan takes in the Seattle Seahawks Super Bowl victory parade on February 11. An estimated 1 million people came downtown to celebrate.

IAEE Announces Acquisition of Exhibitor Group

By Todd McElwee

In what it said is a “landmark acquisition” representing a “bold” strategic move to unite exhibition organizers and exhibitors within a cohesive ecosystem, IAEE has entered into a definitive agreement to acquire Exhibitor Group. The latter publishes *EXHIBITOR* magazine and is the producer of EXHIBITOR LIVE.

The association said by integrating Exhibitor Group’s expertise in exhibit and corporate event marketing with its leadership in exhibition organization, the combined entity will offer enhanced value to all stakeholders. The financial terms of the deal weren’t disclosed and IAEE didn’t provide a sales price before press deadline.

“This acquisition reflects our commitment to building a more comprehensive and inclusive exhibitions and events industry,” said Marsha Flanagan, CEM, President & CEO of IAEE. “By expanding our universe to include the vital perspectives of exhibit and brand managers, we’re creating a unified space where all voices are heard and represented. This is more than an acquisition – it’s a change that will elevate the entire exhibitions and events industry.”

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Board Launches Search for New CEO of Panama City Beach CVB

Jonathan Trager

Following the arrests of two Visit Panama City Beach employees on grand theft and fraud charges, the Tourist Development Council (TDC) in Bay County, Florida, has launched

a search for a successor to President & CEO Dan Rowe, who announced his resignation at the end of January.

At a February 10 meeting, the TDC board opened the application window for candidates until February 27. The process will include an interview phase,

ranking of candidates, and a public forum with the chosen candidates.

“I personally like to get things done quickly,” said TDC Chair Clair Pease, according to local news outlet WJHG. “I am not very good at being on gov-

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NYC Sues Landlord Alleging Illegal Short-Term Rentals

By Jordan Bradley

The New York City Mayor’s Office of Special Enforcement (OSE) on February 6 filed a multi-million dollar lawsuit against Mark Militana, a local landlord, alleging he has been operating illegal short-term rentals in rent-stabilized buildings.

According to the OSE, Militana owns two rent-stabilized brownstones on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. The office is alleging that Militana has been marketing and selling nine apartments in the buildings as short-

term rentals, violating New York’s Local Law 18, which passed in 2022 and “explicitly prohibits short-term rentals in units where the rent is regulated,” the OSE said.

“Local Law 18 is a robust first line of defense against the online proliferation of illegal short-term rental listings,” said Christian Klossner, Executive Director of the Mayor’s Office of Special Enforcement. “At a time when the city is experiencing a housing and affordability crisis, this

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L.A. Approves Ballot Measure to Boost Hotel Tax for Olympics

By Jordan Bradley

The Los Angeles City Council at a February 10 meeting approved placing a measure on a June ballot that would increase hotel taxes in the city through the 2028 Olympic Games.

The ballot measure proposed by the council would increase the city’s transient occupancy tax (TOT or hotel tax) from the current rate of 14% to 16% through 2028, then reduce it to 15% in

2029, according to L.A. City Council documents.

The measure stands to add \$44 million in annual tax revenue through 2028 and \$22 million when the rate reduces to 15%, according to estimates from the city’s administrative officer Matt Szabo.

The tax revenue would be used for services throughout Los Angeles, including emergency services, parks and sidewalk repairs, according

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NEWS

Destinations International Releases Report Linking Canadian Visitation to Exports

By Jonathan Trager

Destinations International (DI) has released “The Impact of the Visitor Economy on Canadian Exports,” a research report that explores the potential connection between inbound visitation and long-term growth in Canadian exports.

“The visitor economy is not a standalone sector; it is a platform for economic growth,” said Don Welsh, President & CEO of DI. “This research validates what destination leaders have long understood in practice: that attracting international visitors helps build relationships, strengthen Canada’s global reputation and create the conditions that drive exports, investment and long-term prosperity for communities across the country.”

The study developed with EY-Parthenon finds a statistically significant relationship between inbound

visitation and export performance. Using a multi-decade, panel-data econometric analysis covering more than 20 years of data, the study shows that a 1% increase in international visitors to Canada is associated with approximately CAD \$1.06 billion in additional Canadian goods and services exports over a two-year period, beyond the direct export of tourism services themselves.

“The study suggests that destinations successful in attracting visitors could also be better positioned to attract business capital, skilled talent, new residents, and the expansion of export-driven industries,” according to DI. “By viewing the visitor economy as a foundational element of economic strategy, policymakers and business leaders can unlock broader returns on destination promotion and visitor engagement.”

The study was led by DI’s Canadian housing affordability crisis.”

According to the *New York Times*, the lawsuit identifies Militana’s website for rental reservations as brownstonehospitalitysuites.com.

Though the *Times*’ February 6 article reported the website had been shut down immediately following the OSE’s filing of the lawsuit, *USAE* gained access to the website on February 10. Units were still bookable on February 10 and required a minimum stay of four days.

The website is not clearly or noticeably affiliated with Airbnb. Despite that, the breakdown of fees denotes a \$275 “Airbnb cleaning fee.”

The OSE also alleges that Militana employed deceptive practices—including using fake names and addresses—in the listings.

When attempting to contact Militana for comment, *USAE* reached out to a phone number listed on rental bookings available through brownstonehospitalitysuites.com. The number was attributed to a “Mark Miller.” *USAE* did not receive comments by deadline, nor did *USAE* receive a comment when attempting to contact “Miller” via an email with a Gmail domain listed on the same website.

The *Times* identified a fake address as “Central Park West, 10024, New York” which led to confused renters asking tenants for directions when they couldn’t find the listing they booked, the outlet reports.

Furthermore, tenants of the building claim “Militana removed the buzzer and intercom system from one of the buildings to prevent city inspectors from entering,” the OSE said.

an Destination Leadership Council (CDLC) and made possible through the financial support of its members and the DI Foundation.

“This report provides new evidence of how the visitor economy is a driver of Canada’s export growth and long-term competitiveness,” said Nancy Small, CEO of Tourism Richmond (BC) and Co-Chair of DI’s Canadian Destination Leadership

Council. “The Canadian Destination Leadership Council plays a critical role in advancing research and thought leadership that elevates the voice of destinations nationally, and this study provides powerful evidence that investing in destination promotion is also an investment in economic resilience for communities across Canada.”

The full report is available [online](#).

L.A. Tax

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to a draft of the ballot measure obtained by the *Los Angeles Times*.

The measure was approved by 13 of the council’s 15 members, landing it on the June ballot.

Councilmember Tim McOsker voted in favor of the measure council meeting, though he noted the 2% increase “is a pretty significant jump, but it’s a jump that’s justified by the Olympics.”

“I do think that there is a logic that we can explain to the electorate, and to ourselves, that the Olympics create an opportunity to add some jet fuel to our visitor-serving community,” McOsker said.

Councilmember Monica Rodriguez, who voted against the tax, told *LAist* that she was concerned the policy could have unintentional ramifications on the city’s already-strained housing market by discouraging travelers from booking hotels and opting for short-term rentals in private homes.

“To be able to have access to that residential housing stock, we need to

create some disincentive for the expansion of short-term rentals,” she said.

The Hotel Association of Los Angeles (HALA) is speaking out against the measure, saying the increase in hotel taxes don’t make the most of the opportunities that hosting a global event offer.

“Increasing the hotel bed tax risks undermining Los Angeles’ ability to fully capitalize on global events such as the World Cup and the 2028 Olympics by making accommodations outside city limits more competitive,” said Jackie Filla, President and CEO of HALA in a statement to *USAE*. “While these events will be temporary, any tax increase would be permanent.”

She continued: “To maximize long-term revenues, the City should pursue policies that strengthen the hotel industry’s ability to attract visitors, support higher room rates, and encourage new hotel investment and construction—rather than policies that constrain demand or shift visitation elsewhere. Policies that weaken hotel competitiveness risk reducing—not increasing—long-term City revenues.”

Panama City CEO

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ernment time, which is usually very slow, so we have a schedule, and we are going to try and stick to that as close as possible.”

The candidate the TDC chooses will then have to be approved by the Bay County Board of Commissioners.

The TDC and CVB have recently come under public scrutiny after the arrests last month of Aaron Lee, Vice President of Administration, and Stephen Bailey, Vice President of Sales and Marketing. Both men stand accused of using CVB-issued credit cards to pay for many thousands of dollars in unauthorized expenditures.

Rowe provided the board with a three-month notice of his resignation, as required by his employment contract, in a January 30 letter emailed

to Pease. On January 13, Rowe had announced he’d be taking a paid leave of absence.

“It has been an honor and a privilege to serve the CVB for the past 18 years and to lead the incredible staff of dedicated destination marketing professionals that work tirelessly to grow Bay County’s economy by positioning Panama City Beach as a dynamic tourism destination,” Rowe said in the letter.

Pease, who had taken over Rowe’s responsibilities leading the CVB during his absence, issued a statement acknowledging his resignation.

“The Board remains focused on ensuring continuity of operations, maintaining accountability, and protecting the public interest,” Pease said. “Transition matters will be handled in an orderly and transparent manner consistent with Board direction and applicable policies.”

NYC Rentals

continued from page 1

law preserves an integral part of the city’s housing stock while illustrating that rent-regulated units exist for local residents.”

Militana has made more than \$550,000 since February 2023 on properties located at 24 West 89th Street and 44 West 89th Street that hosted more than 900 transient guests, the lawsuit alleges,

The OSE also claims Militana had been advertising the units on Airbnb “when the major online platform came into compliance with the verification requirements of Local Law 18,” which required Airbnb hosts and short-term rental companies to remove listings from their websites that were not registered with the city.

Instead of complying with Local Law 18 and shutting down short-term rentals in the rent-stabilized units, Militana built his own website to advertise short-term stays in the units. He has allegedly continued advertising and renting the rooms to short-term guests, despite a 2024 cease-and-desist letter, the OSE said.

“New York City’s rent-regulated buildings exist to house New Yorkers—period,” said Mayor Zohran Kwame Mamdani. “My administration is committed to enforcing short-term rental laws and holding bad actors accountable when they take indispensable housing off the market. We will pursue enforcement actions like this aggressively to directly and swiftly confront our city’s

HOTS

HOTS Olympic-Sized Stoot Love... The Winter Olympics are upon us, and superfans have flocked to Milan, Italy. According to the Associated Press, they have also flocked to the gift shops. Reports on the ground say that stuffed versions of the Games' mascots—stoot siblings named Milan and Cortina d'Ampezza—were nowhere to be found less than a week into the events. According to AP, Cortina (aka Tina), is the lighter-colored stoot, and represents the Olympic Winter Games, while her younger brother Milan (aka Milo) represents the Paralympic Winter Games. The plush characters have been wildly popular. If a store is able to restock merchandise featuring Tina and Milo, they are sold out quickly, but

Olympic medalists are given a plush stoot along with their medals. HOTS wonders how long before a superfan tries to enter the games just for a chance at the stoot!

* * * * *

HOTS Cat Burglar... The thief at the center of a string of underwear thefts—that's right: underwear—at a school in New Zealand has been identified as a cat. After more than a year of mysteriously missing towels, shoes and underwear at the Apanui

School in Whakatāne, the school was able to catch the burglar on camera, Marama Stewart, the school's principal said. The cat seemed to steal items most frequently when the school's pool was open and in use, she said. "Initially we noticed single shoes and goggles and undies and towels left along the footpath into the school," Stewart told Stuff.co.nz. After installing a camera on the property, "a pair of togs [swimming trunks] went missing," Stewart said, leading an employee to check

the camera. Lo and behold, a black cat was seen scampering off with the trunks. After the cat was identified as the thief, school staff found "a large stash" behind a PE shed. The school's groundskeeper reached out to the cat's owner, who confirmed the cat was known to have sticky paws. Stewart said the school has taken to calling the cat "Slinky Malinki" and chose not to identify the owner. HOTS bets those kids will remember to keep track of their belongings now for fear of Slinky Malinki!

Bills to Boost Tourism Among North American Countries Introduced

By Todd McElwee

Bills seeking to bolster travel and tourism ties within the United States, Canada and Mexico have been introduced in both chambers of Congress.

The *USMCA Travel and Tourism Resiliency Act* has been introduced by Rep. Vern Buchanan (R-FL), Vice Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and a senior member of the Trade Subcommittee, and Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL) in the House. Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV) and Sen. Jerry Moran (R-KN) have done the same in the upper chamber.

The House version was introduced February 10, with the Senate version arriving on February 6. U.S. Travel Association backs the effort.

"Travel is America's top services export and a critical engine for jobs and economic growth in every state, said Erik Hansen, Sr. Vice President, Head of Government Relations, U.S. Travel Association, about the Senate's bill. "As the United States faces a decline in international visitation, this bipartisan legislation would ensure travel

and tourism are prioritized in the upcoming USMCA joint review. Creating a Travel and Tourism Trade Working Group will deepen cooperation with Canada and Mexico, strengthen North America's competitiveness, expand travel exports, and support the millions of American workers and businesses that rely on travel."

The *USMCA Travel and Tourism Resiliency Act* requires the U.S. Trade Representative advocate for the establishment of a Travel and Tourism Trade Working

Group as part of the upcoming Joint Review of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). The USMCA, which went into force in 2020, established joint working groups for other industries, but tourism and travel are not currently represented.

"Travel and tourism are vital not only to Nevada's economy, but to the economy of the United States as a whole," said Cortez Masto. "As

we've seen over the past year, tariffs, trade, and international cooperation play a large role in either promoting or deterring international travel. As partners in this historic trade agreement, it's critical that we do what we

can to invite Canada and Mexico to support the American travel industry."

"Travel and tourism are major drivers of the U.S. economy, supporting millions of jobs, generating significant export revenue, and strengthening communities across the country," said Bilirakis. "As we prepare to welcome the world for America's 250th anniversary, establishing a dedicated Travel and Tourism Trade Working Group will provide a focused forum to address trade barriers, expand market access, and enhance cooperation, ensuring this critical sector continues to contribute to economic growth, competitiveness, and resilience."

can to invite Canada and Mexico to support the American travel industry."

"Travel and tourism are vital not only to Nevada's economy, but to the economy of the United States as a whole," said Cortez Masto.

ASAE Comments on House Hearing on Foreign Influence in American Nonprofits

By Todd McElwee

On February 10, the House of Representatives' Ways and Means Committee hosted a hearing titled "Foreign Influence in American Non-profits: Unmasking Threats from Beijing and Beyond."

Rep. Jason Smith (R-MO), Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, called the hearing to examine how foreign actors have allegedly funneled millions of dollars through networks of tax-exempt organizations to create, support, and fuel disruption and illegal activity across the nation.

"The manipulation and abuse of

tax-exempt status by foreign nationals is unacceptable. Tax-exempt status is a privilege, not a right," Smith said. "To the tax-exempt groups who set out on a mission to provide benefits to communities, we are encouraged by the good work you are doing. To the tax-exempt groups hiding in darkness and stirring up unrest in this country, know that this Committee is coming for you."

ASAE expressed its appreciation for industry support on Capitol Hill and reinforced the significance of confidence in the nonprofit sector.

Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE, President & CEO, ASAE, told USAE: "ASAE

appreciates that leaders on both sides of the aisle recognize the vital importance of America's freedom of association—a foundational principle that empowers nonprofits to contribute meaningfully to civic life and strengthens our democracy. Through the Trust Associations initiative, associations continue to demonstrate their commitment to transparency, accountability, and ensuring that policymakers understand the essential role our community plays in solving problems, elevating professions, and supporting thriving communities."

Find the complete hearing [here](#).

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CVBs AND
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NEWS

CCIA Continues Battles Against Speech and Privacy Concerns

By Todd McElwee

The Computer & Communications Industry Association (CCIA) is continuing its fight against legislation that potentially violates First Amendment rights and/or raises privacy concerns.

In the first half of February alone, CCIA has been active with seven states, including testifying before legislatures and filing lawsuits in federal court. In Utah, Nebraska, New Mexico, Virginia, Maryland, Texas and Hawaii the association has worked on issues that include app download age restrictions, election-related deceptive media, artificial intelligence, automation in the workforce and more.

CCIA sued Utah in federal court to block the App Store Accountability Act. It said the bill is a violation of the First Amendment adding the law, much like the Texas law that was recently enjoined in *CCIA v. Paxton*, imposes a sweeping age-verification, parental consent, and de facto compelled

speech regime on both app stores and app developers that would block access to lawful speech and likely intrude upon users' privacy. If the app store "determines" a user is under 18 years old, the law prohibits them from downloading many apps and software programs and from making in-app purchases unless their parent consents and is given control over the minor's account.

"This Utah law raises many of the same constitutional concerns that caused another court to block the Texas app store law," said Stephanie Joyce, Sr. Vice President, Chief of Staff, CCIA, and Director of CCIA Litigation Center. "When a state erects a barrier to the vast library of online speech unless the speaker jumps through a series of age-gating hoops, it must

receive exacting constitutional scrutiny. Under well-settled precedent, that scrutiny warrants judicial intervention to ensure that adults and young people can continue to access the lawful online speech of their choice."

"Courts have repeatedly held that states may not compel or restrict how digital services organize or display content in violation of the First Amendment," CCIA said.

CCIA noted it was testifying before the Nebraska Legislature's Banking, Insurance, and Commerce Committee in opposition to the Age-Appropriate Online Design Code Act on February 9. The association warns the

proposal raises serious constitutional, privacy, and operational concerns that could harm Nebraska consumers

and businesses.

"Courts have repeatedly held that states may not compel or restrict how digital services organize or display content in violation of the First Amendment," CCIA said.

Megan Stokes, State Policy Director for the Computer & Communications Industry Association, said: "Protecting children's safety and privacy online is a goal we all share. Unfortunately, LB 1119 takes an approach that raises serious constitutional questions, creates legal uncertainty for businesses, and risks unintended consequences for Nebraska consumers. CCIA stands ready to help lawmakers focus on solutions that are effective, clearly defined, and consistent with longstanding constitutional principles."

Find more information [here](#).

Indiana Bride-to-Be Alleges Harassment by Chicago Hotel Union

By Jordan Bradley

A woman in South Bend, Indiana, is seeking a lawyer after she experienced months of alleged harassment and stalking by a Chicago hotel union she says began last November.

Lauren Johnson is planning to be married in July, and, like many modern brides, created a website to help her guests prepare for her big day. The website included a list of hotels near the wedding venue where guests could stay should they need accommodations. On the list was the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel South Bend.

"I just recommended it on my wedding website because it was one of the closest hotels," Johnson told CBS News.

Suddenly, Johnson claims she began receiving calls at her place of employment from someone identifying herself as "Sarah" whom she did not know. She declined the calls, she said in a public Facebook post, but eventually her friends began receiving calls from her as well.

Johnson eventually found out the person calling was a representative from Unite Here Local 1, a hotel union based in Chicago that also represents hotel workers in northern Indiana, wanting Johnson to boycott the DoubleTree she mentioned on her website.

"It was getting out of hand so I politely called Sarah back left a voicemail telling her to please stop contacting me and my friends. Come to find out she was wanting me to boycott a hotel I had listed as a recommendation on my wedding website. WITH OTHER

HOTELS LISTED not just this one hotel," Johnson wrote in a January 19 post.

Johnson has no affiliations with Unite Here or the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel South Bend, according to CBS News, and did not sign a contract with the hotel.

She continued: "Once I left her a voicemail I thought it was over. I was at work and around 10 am I see 3 people unrolling a huge banner saying the following below in the pictures. I was shaking and so upset why they would do this TO ME. I had to leave work because of this."

According to a photo shared publicly on Johnson's Facebook, the sign read, "TELL LAUREN JOHNSON TO BOYCOTT DOUBLETREE HOTEL SOUTH BEND."

Johnson removed the hotel from her wedding website that day. She later filed a police report for harassment and again "thought that was the end of it," she said.

But then some of Johnson's friends began receiving fake wedding invitations that read, "Love is a choice. So is standing with workers. Say 'I don't' to this union boycotted hotel." The invitation prompted Johnson to file another police report.

Johnson made her wedding website private and only accessible with a password to protect her information, she said. After she did so, she received a letter dated January 9 from Steven Wyatt, Boycott Organizer for Local 1.

"We noted that you removed the Double Tree South Bend Hotel from

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Cincy Convention Center Becomes First Financial Center

By Jonathan Trager

First Financial Bank has purchased the naming rights to the newly renovated Cincinnati Convention Center, which will now be known as the First Financial Center.

City leaders announced the deal with the Cincinnati-based company on February 9. The sale price for the 15-year contract wasn't disclosed.

"The new convention center is critical to the economic vitality of Cincinnati and the region. It will be a catalyst for growth and prosperity for our residents and businesses for years to come," said First Financial Bank CEO Archie Brown during a press conference. "It will also help businesses and visitors experience what we already

know: That Cincinnati is a great place to live, work and play."

The convention center, which reopened at the start of this year following the \$265 million renovation, had been named Duke Energy Center. The company is the region's primary electric and natural gas utility provider.

Duke Energy agreed last September to relinquish the naming rights in exchange for \$1.6 million from the city, according to the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. That \$10 million contract was terminated six years earlier than anticipated.

First Financial already has numerous local partnerships and sponsorships, such as those with FC Cincinnati, The Aronoff's Broadway series, and Playhouse in the Park.



In February, Southwest Airlines expanded its network with flights now occurring between Orlando and Cyril E. King Airport in St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands. Shown here are Southwest Airlines and USVI representatives celebrating the news.

NEWS

ILHA Surpasses 1 Million Members Globally

By Jordan Bradley

The International Luxury Hotel Association (ILHA) surpassed one million members, the association announced in early February, marking some “incredible momentum.”

As every membership-reliant association knows, such achievements never happen by accident.

“Reaching this milestone was the result of a deliberate, multi-channel strategy centered on relevance, access, and meaningful connection,” said Sharon Hirschowitz, Global Head of Media & Communications at ILHA, in a statement to *USAE*.

Throughout 2025, Hirschowitz said, ILHA prioritized three core pillars: global in-person engagement, sharing content focused on key industry issues, and spotlighting the ILHA community.

The association hosted two INSPIRE conferences, one in Prague—the ILHA’s first conference in Central Europe—and one in Las Vegas.

“Our INSPIRE conferences in Prague and Las Vegas were instrumental in driving both visibility and membership growth,” Hirschowitz said. “These events brought together hundreds of luxury hospitality leaders—including owners, investors, operators, de-

signers, and solution providers—for forward-looking discussions on capital flows, technology, brand strategy, and the future of luxury travel.”

Both conferences put strong emphasis on “curated networking,” Hirschowitz said, featuring president dinners, VIP experiences, and structured meetups.

“The result was not just content consumption, but real relationship-building,” Hirschowitz said. “That sense of community significantly contributed to increased traffic, referrals, and member engagement.”

Over the course of last year, ILHA saw a 50% increase in its website traffic. Hirschowitz attributed the jump to the association’s prioritization of “timely, high-value” content and communications centered on current issues facing the luxury hospitality industry.

The luxury hospitality sector is outperforming many sectors “despite broader market uncertainty,” Hirschowitz noted. Throughout 2025, ILHA aimed to provide deep insight on capital strategy, development trends, optimizing margins amid cost pressures, “the intersection of AI and guest experience, wellness and longevity as emerging luxury drivers,” and “sustainability as an operational

imperative” through interviews with industry subject matter experts, ILHA’s ongoing webinar series, and event coverage, she said.

In its ongoing effort to retain members, ILHA spent 2025 spotlighting members, speakers, partners and rising leaders both online and at live events, Hirschowitz said.

“By elevating our community’s profiles, we create a reciprocal ecosystem: members don’t just join ILHA—they gain exposure, credibility, and access to decision-makers,” she said. “That visibility drives retention because professionals feel seen, valued, and connected to a global network.”

Looking at 2026 strategy, Hirschowitz said the association will focus on “building on this foundation with both continuity and refinement.”

ILHA will continue offering timely webinar series on topics critical to

the luxury sector and uplifting members. The association will also release the 2026 INSPIRE calendar of global events soon, with expanded dedicated board meeting sessions at the Las Vegas event.

“Our strategy for 2026 is not about growth for growth’s sake—it’s about deepening connection, elevating the voices within our community, and creating environments where collaboration drives real commercial and experiential innovation,” Hirschowitz said.

For ILHA, Hirschowitz said, reaching 1 million members is, indeed, “a milestone, but it’s also a signal of where the luxury hospitality industry is heading: toward greater personalization, stronger human connection, and smarter innovation. ILHA will continue to serve as the platform where those conversations happen.”

IAEE Welcoming Scholarship and Grant Applications

By Todd McElwee

Looking to propel the careers of industry members through education and opportunity,

IAEE is accepting applications for its scholarship and grant programs. The deadline to apply is March 30.

“Education and professional development are the cornerstones of a thriving exhibitions and events industry,” said Marsha Flanagan, CEM, President & CEO, IAEE. “Through these scholarship and grant programs, we’re not only supporting individual career aspirations but also strengthening the entire industry by ensuring diverse perspectives and fresh talent continue to drive innovation and excellence in our field.”

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.

The initiative is awarded on a

competitive basis taking field of study, recommendations and educational achievement into account. It aims to promote the exhibitions and events industry by attracting college-level students and supporting their studies with financial assistance.

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, with funding opportunities including global exchange experiences for programs outside recipients’ home countries, education sessions at industry events and CEM learning opportunities.

Find more information [here](#).

IAEE

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events industry.”

In 2022, STAR Exhibits & Environments CEO Mark Johnson acquired Exhibitor Group to preserve an industry voice during a time of uncertainty and disruption post-COVID—bringing stability, vision, and investment to position the brand for long-term success, IAEE said.

“As we grew our overall experiential marketing business, we recognized that EXHIBITOR needed a dedicated owner to fully realize its potential, said Johnson. “IAEE acquiring EXHIBITOR is a rare opportunity for two market leaders to come together to serve the entire exhibit ecosystem and its stakeholders from exposition managers to event marketers to industry suppliers.”

IAEE noted its members will have expanded access to resources, insights, and networking opportunities with exhibit and brand managers. For the Exhibitor Group community, IAEE highlighted the continuity of the same publication and EXHIBITOR

LIVE event, but now enhanced with expanded access to IAEE’s resources, including connections to organizers and suppliers, plus comprehensive professional and personal development tools.

Brian Pagel, Chairperson of the IAEE Board, said: “This acquisition reinforces IAEE’s commitment to innovation and connection across the exhibitions and events community. By integrating Exhibitor Group’s trusted education, insights, and community into IAEE’s global association framework, we are creating a powerful platform for growth – expanding the value delivered to organizers, exhibitors, and suppliers across the full event lifecycle.”

The acquisition is expected to be finalized by April 30. Following the completion of the acquisition, IAEE will work closely with the Exhibitor team to ensure a seamless integration of operations.

The price of the deal is not being released. IAEE told *USAE* that both organizations will continue to operate as they do today, with no changes to staff or operations.

Stay Connected



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NEWS

Gary Shapiro Stepping Down as CEO of CTA President Kinsey Fabrizio Also Becoming CEO

By Todd McElwee

Gary Shapiro, the tenured and decorated CEO of the Consumer Technology Association (CTA), is ending his 35-year run in the post. He will continue to serve as Executive Chair, a role he has occupied since January 1.

Current CTA President Kinsey Fabrizio will become President & CEO and continue to serve on the Executive Board. The leadership transition will be effective May 1.

“There is a time for everything, and I’m pleased with the new opportunities for CTA and for my next chapter,” said Shapiro. “This transition is part of a long-planned succession. It strengthens our long-term vision and ensures stability as we move forward. I’m excited to continue to partner closely with Kinsey to keep driving progress for the tech industry and CES. Our future is bright and I look forward to championing Kinsey, the important work of our entire organization, and pursuing new ventures.”

“I am thankful to have spent most of my career at CTA, learning the organization and working alongside its most important resource, our people,” said Fabrizio.

“I am thankful to have spent most of my career at CTA, learning the organization and working alongside its most important resource, our people,” said Fabrizio. “Most importantly, I am grateful for the last 18 years I’ve spent learning from Gary, seeing firsthand how he advocates for our industry, our members, and CES. I’m excited to take on this new role and appreciate that he will continue to mentor me.”

Shapiro’s tenure at CTA has been transformational. The Consumer Electronics Show (CES) has become the largest annual domestic trade show. Under his leadership, CTA’s membership, revenue, and assets expanded

tenfold. CTA became an independent association, created the CTA Foundation and instituted a student loan payoff program and \$40,000 forgivable home loan for purchases near its office.

A *New York Times* bestselling author, Shapiro has written a series of books, including *Pivot or Die: How Leaders Thrive When Everything Changes* published in



Gary Shapiro

2024. In 2025, he received The Media Institute’s Freedom of Speech Award, honoring his leadership in technology and advocacy for free expression. In 2021 he received the Légion d’Honneur (Legion of Honor awarded personally by French President Macron). He was also knighted by The Royal Order of Francis I in 2025. CTA has been recognized as a Best Place to Work.



Kinsey Fabrizio

In his role as Executive Chair, Shapiro will continue to serve as a spokesperson for CTA and CES and advocate for innovation.

Fabrizio joined the association in 2008. As President, she serves on CTA’s Executive Board and has driven strategy and growth for the association and CES, overseeing the organization’s core business units and operations. In 2025, she testified before Congress advocating for a federal framework for artificial intelligence.

As senior vice president, she oversaw CES show operations, led an expansion of CES products, and spearheaded a modernization of CTA’s membership infrastructure and categories. Fabrizio created CTA’s Health Division, launched a healthcare provider program for doctors at CES 2015, and supported the development of the industry’s first voluntary best practices for wearable data.

Before joining CTA, Fabrizio worked with SmithBucklin and Northern Virginia Mediation Service. She is a member of the George Mason University Costello College of Business Dean’s Advisory Council and the Washington Economic Club. Fabrizio holds a BA from George Mason University and an MBA from the University of Maryland Global Campus.

“Today marks an important moment for CTA,” said Pat Lavelle, Industry Executive Advisor, CTA Executive Board. “The Executive Board is proud of the strength and continuity this transition brings, and deeply excited for how it sets CTA up for continued success. With Gary and Kinsey in their new roles, we move forward with confidence, focus, and a shared commitment to our future.”

Hard Rock Commences \$50M Renovation at Atlantic City Property

By Jordan Bradley

Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Atlantic City is undergoing a \$50 million renovation of its guest rooms, suites, penthouses, walkways and corridors, the property announced on February 9.

The property says that the renovation is a reaffirmation of “its commitment to excellence” and Atlantic City.

“Our \$50 million capital improvement plan for 2026 reflects Hard Rock

Atlantic City’s unwavering commitment to reinvesting in our resort, our team members, and the Atlantic City community,” said George Goldhoff, President of Hard Rock Hotel & Casino Atlantic City.

The renovation—already underway on the property—will see more than 700 guest rooms, more than 60 suites, and eight penthouses in the Hard Rock Atlantic City’s North Tower refreshed, the company said, along with the tow-

er’s walkways and corridors.

In addition, the property will add new dining concepts, including Sita, “an artfully designed East-Indian restaurant, with modern Indian cuisine shaped by cultural influences and featuring Boardwalk views,” Hard Rock said, and the premier of Philadelphia’s “beloved” Federal Donuts and Chicken, which is expected to open this spring.

As part of the renovation, Hard Rock Atlantic City has already added 16 electric vehicle chargers at the Rocktane Gas & Wash, and restorations of the property’s South Tower are currently underway.

Hard Rock Atlantic City said that, cumulatively, the property has seen almost \$700 million in investments in the resort since 2018.

“From redesigned guest suites and new dining concepts to world-class entertainment, and continued community engagement, these investments ensure we continue delivering an exceptional guest experience while honoring one of our four core mottos to ‘Love All, Serve All,’” Goldhoff said.

South Bend Hotel has not be re-added. If you have honored the boycott, I thank you on behalf of our members. If you have not, I urge you to do so.”

Johnson has since filed a cease-and-desist last month, CBS News reports. In a February 3 post, Johnson pleaded for legal advice, saying even after filing a police report and sending the cease-and-desist, she is still being harassed by union representatives.

USAE reached out to Local 1’s press contact, Sarah Lyons, via email and phone, but did not receive a return message by press deadline. USAE also reached out to Wyatt for comment, but again did not receive a return message.

Indiana Bride

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your wedding website on December 11th,” the letter reads. “Initially, we took this as an implicit agreement to honor our requests that you boycott the hotel. However, later in the same day we noticed your wedding website was now set to private with password protection. This prevents us from confirming whether the venue has remained removed or has been reinstated. I respectfully ask that you return the wedding website to public view or provide us with the password so we can verify that the DoubleTree

NEWS

Developers to Redesign Syracuse Hotel Due to Financial Concerns

By Jordan Bradley

The developer of a much-anticipated new-build hotel in Syracuse, New York, is pausing the project to redesign due to financial challenges, according to local reports.

The Onondaga Hotel, a proposed 10-story, 248-room hotel set for downtown Syracuse, was planned to open in summer 2027. However, developers Sun Development and its Hayner Hoyt Corp., told local news outlet syracuse.com that plans are under review.

“Due to economic pressures, we are reviewing potential changes to the project design to make the project financeable and able to move forward,” said Jeremy Thurston, President of Hayner Hoyt.

The hotel’s plans had been under scrutiny late last November, when a neighbor to the proposed project filed a lawsuit against the city and Sun Development that claimed the new build hotel would negatively impact the area if plans were not changes.

Fred Davies, owner of Putnam Properties LLC and a building neighboring

the lot, filed the lawsuit seeking to nullify an approval of the project by the Planning Commission based on a decision from the Syracuse Industrial Development Agency. Although the agency had determined the project would not have a negative environmental impact on the region, Davies claimed otherwise.

The new plans will require the city to reevaluate the approvals, meaning the dispute has been settled for the time being.

A city official said the lawsuit was not what spurred the change in devel-

opment plans.

“The developers decided they needed to retool,” said Eric Ennic, Chief Development Officer for Syracuse, in an interview with syracuse.com. “The lawsuit ultimately was not what necessitated those changes. It was the working through the economics of the project.”

Developers have not shared what changes will be made to the Onondaga Hotel’s plans. However, they told syracuse.com that they hope to be able to start construction late this year.



Earlier this month, Maryland Gov. Wes Moore (center) joined Plamondon Hospitality Partners and Frederick County elected leaders to celebrate the groundbreaking of the Marriott Downtown Frederick at Carroll Creek. The project is scheduled to be completed in 2027.

CVB Update

The Austin Film Commission, a part of **Visit Austin**, is marking the 40th anniversary of the office with the release of a new video campaign that showcases Austin as a premier filming destination.

The Texas commission was established in 1986 and has worked with more than 400 feature film and television series and 2,000+ commercials shoots made in Austin. The new video is an extension of that, highlighting why Austin is a competitive global destination for media production.

“Celebrating 40 years of the Austin Film Commission highlights the vital link between film and our city’s economy,” said Tom Noonan, President & CEO of Visit Austin. “When audiences see Austin’s iconic locations on screen, it boosts our global profile and invites visitors to experience our renowned hospitality firsthand. This milestone campaign reinforces Austin’s legacy as a premier destination to live, work, and visit.”

The new video kicks off a year-long marketing campaign and will be used to market the city to big studio projects and independent filmmakers as well as commercial producers and

content creators. It can be viewed [here](#).

Visit Anaheim announced on February 10 the launch of “We Love Locals,” a new digital savings pass powered by Bandwango and created exclusively for residents of Anaheim and Garden Grove.

Featuring offers from more than 34 participating partners, the “We Love Locals” Savings Pass encourages residents to explore their own backyard in new ways while supporting neighborhood businesses and rediscovering familiar favorites. The digital pass allows residents to browse featured offers, redeem savings at participating locations, and explore at their own pace using their mobile devices.

“While Visit Anaheim is known for welcoming visitors from around the world, our local community is just as important,” said Scott Oklin, Chief Marketing Officer of Visit Anaheim. “We created the ‘We Love Locals’ Pass to celebrate and strengthen connections with the people who call Anaheim and Garden Grove home, while supporting the small businesses that are at the heart of our neighborhoods.”

Owners Reportedly Prepare to Sell Waldorf Astoria

By Jordan Bradley

The owners of the Waldorf Astoria in New York City are preparing to list the hotel for sale just months after reopening following a multi-billion dollar, 8-year renovation, according to a February 11 report from the *Wall Street Journal*.

The property’s owner, Anbang Insurance Group, a reinsurance firm in China, spent more than \$4 billion on renovations to the property that transformed its 1,400 guest rooms into 375 hotel rooms and 372 residences. The renovations, which began in 2017, took five years longer than expected and were more than \$1 billion over budget. The hotel only reopened last November.

According to the *Journal*, the Waldorf’s attached restaurants, shops and other amenities are expected to be included in the sale, but the condos would be sold separately.

Anbang bought the Waldorf Astoria from Hilton in 2014 for \$1.95 billion. The sale included a 100-year management contract with Hilton and was one of the most expensive hotel sales to date.

After Anbang’s CEO Wu Xiaohui was prosecuted for economic crimes in 2018, the Chinese state-run Dajia Insurance Group was appointed to manage Anbang’s assets.

The flagship property for Hilton’s Waldorf Astoria brand is expected to sell for more than \$1 billion, the *Journal* reports.

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