



Play Ball! Giants Enterprises welcomed business events industry guests to the San Francisco Giants' Spring Training facility of Scottsdale Stadium in Scottsdale, Arizona, this month. Shown here is Fred Dixon, President & CEO, Brand USA, and Caroline Beteta, President & CEO, Visit California, who threw out first pitches. The group shot includes Joey Nevin, Vice President, Giants Enterprises; Peter Gomez, President & CEO, Visit Oakland; Paul Vandeventer, President & CEO, MPI; Stephen Revetria, President, Giants Enterprises; Dixon; Beteta; Anna Marie Presutti, President & CEO, SF Travel; Aaron Schwartz, Chief Public Affairs Officer, Brand USA; Rachel Sacco, President & CEO, Experience Scottsdale; Stephanie DeVries, Chief of Staff, Visit California; Ryan Becker, Sr. Vice President, Visit California; and Rich Ramirez, Director, Park Hyatt Cabo Del Sol. <https://my.asaecenter.org/>

## ASAE Urging Congress to Fund TSA

By Todd McElwee

ASAE sent a letter to Congress on March 17 urging immediate action to fully fund the Department of Homeland Security and ensure uninterrupted operations at the Transportation Security Administration (TSA).

Congruently, an Advocacy Alert, which included the letter as well as a call to action, was e-mailed to members of the association community. Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE, AAiP, President & CEO, ASAE, signed both correspondents.

"Stable funding for TSA is essential to keeping travelers moving—and to safeguarding the association meetings and events that drive economic and professional value across the country," she wrote. "Association conferences and business events support hundreds of thousands of jobs and generate billions in direct spending each year. Any disruption to airport operations has immediate and widespread consequences for our attendees, partners, and host communities."

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## AHLA Testifies Against Proposed Tax Hike to NYC Council

By Jordan Bradley

The American Hotel and Lodging Association (AHLA) outlined significant concerns in its testimony against a proposed tax hike on residential and commercial property to the New York City Council's Committee on Economic Development on March 17.

In a late February budget proposal for fiscal year 2027, New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani proposed a 9.5% property tax increase and changes to the pass-through entity tax in an effort to

close a \$7 billion budget gap should New York Gov. Kathy Hochul not raise taxes on wealthy citizens or corporations.

Mamdani said he was considering tapping into the city's reserve funds and the tax increase was a last resort in a mid-February speech addressing the proposal. He added that "the onus for resolving this crisis should not be placed on the backs of working and middle-class New Yorkers."

New York has not seen a property tax increase in *Please turn to page 5*

# NEWS

## PCMA Names Visionary Awards Lifetime Honorees, Professional Excellence Finalists

By Todd McElwee

PCMA will recognize exemplary contributions to the meetings industry on May 7 at the Visionary Awards in Washington, D.C., capping off Business Events Industry Week.

The 2026 Lifetime Achievement Honorees are Carolyn B. Pund, CMM, DES, Consultant, Strategic Meetings Management, OneMoreEvent Consulting; Dave Lutz, Managing Director, Velvet Chainsaw Consulting; Angie Ranalli, CMP, Senior National Sales Director, San Diego Tourism Authority; and Charles Starks, President & CEO, Music City Center.

The Professional Excellence Awards will also be presented during the gala at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center.

Funds raised from the annual bash support the PCMA Foundation, which has awarded more than 3,000 scholarships since 1985.

“The Visionary Awards are more than a celebration of individual achievement—they are a reflection of the collective progress and purpose of our global community,” said Sherif Karamat, CAE, President & CEO, PCMA and CEMA. “Each of this year’s Honorees and Finalists represents the spirit of innovation, collaboration, and service that defines our community. Through the PCMA Foundation, we are proud to recognize these leaders

while investing in the next generation of professionals who will carry our community forward.”

PCMA said Pund is a transformational leader whose work helped define modern strategic meetings management. The association added she is a pioneer of Strategic Meetings Management Programs (SMMP’s) and co-founder of the Meetings Competitive Advantage Forum.

Lutz founded Velvet Chainsaw Consulting in 2006. PCMA noted he spent 22 years at Conferon (now Maritz), serving as President and as a board member, and added he is Global Hall of Leaders inductee and longtime *Convene* columnist.

PCMA said Ranalli is a respected leader whose career has shaped both destinations and people.

She’s a tenured PCMA and Foundation board leader. Her legacy is defined by mentorship, service, and paying it forward to the next generation, PCMA stated.

PCMA said Starks plays a defining role in shaping Nashville as a premier meetings destination. He led the development of the 2.1-million-square-foot convention center, is a former PCMA chair and dedicated civic leader. The association said his impact spans destination development, industry service, and community stewardship.

Find more information [here](#).



Carolyn B. Pund



Dave Lutz



Angie Ranalli



Charles Starks

## Professional Excellence Awards Finalists

The Professional Excellence Awards recognize achievement across several disciplines. Finalists were selected for exceptional contributions to strategy, marketing, experience design, digital engagement, and industry leadership.

### Business Events Strategist of the Year

- Mindy Grubb, CMP — Vice President, Events, eXp Realty
- Kyle B. Morris — Vice President, NMR Events Inc.
- Liz Nacron — Partner, President of Creative & Production, Live Marketing Corporate Event Marketer of the Year
- Adele Durham, Senior Director, Global Events, Veeam Software
- Kim Hastings, CMM, Director, Event Marketing, Procore Technologies
- Keri Ibbitson, Senior Director of Global Scientific Engagements & Events, Danaher

### Digital Experience Strategist of the Year

- Uzi Drori, Chief Information Of-

ficer, Chief Technology Officer, Kenes Group

- Dahlia El Gazzar, Chief Ruckus-maker, DAHLIA+Agency
- Kimberly Inniger, DES, Senior Events & Outreach Manager, ORCID Experience Design of the Year
- Sina Bunte, CMP, DES, Founder, DigitalMind.events
- Kimberly Keating, Director of Conference Education, Viticus Group
- David T. Stevens, Wellness Architect, Olympian Meeting

### Groundbreaker Award

- Bianca DeStout, Senior Sales Manager, Visit Cincy
- Kyle Jordan, CAE, CEM-AP, CMP Fellow, DES, CMM, Director of Meetings, Institute for Operations Research and the Management Sciences (INFORMS)
- Nuria Fernández Roldán, Online Learning Specialist, Kenes Group

### Impact Award

- Bianca DeStout, Senior Sales Manager, Visit Cincy
- Elena Fis, Sustainability Manager,

Kenes Group

- Joyce Leveston, CMM, CVP – CEO, Javits Convention Center

### Outstanding Service to a Chapter or Region

- Carine M. Desroches, MMP, HMCC, Meetings & Events Director, National Kidney Foundation
- Melissa Peticolas, CEM, CMP, Account Executive, Vista Convention Services

- Lindsay Williams, CMP, CEM, Senior Manager, Business Development, GES

### Supplier of the Year

- Lori Adlesick, Vice President, Strategic Partnerships & Events, Choose Chicago
- Joy Cmiel, Senior Vice President, ConferenceDirect
- Karen Staples, CMP, CASE, Managing Director of Sales, Visit Salt Lake

## Stay Connected

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# HOTS

**HOTS Not-Stuffed Animal...** Patrons of an airport gift shop in Melbourne, Australia, were surprised to find a living animal hidden amongst a collection of stuffed toys and souvenirs, the Associated Press reports. Amongst a collection of stuffed kangaroos, dingoes, Tasmanian devils and bilbies, a type of marsupial native to Australia known for its long, rabbit-like ears, was a living common brushtail possum. The possum's tan and brown fluffy fur helped it blend in with the plush kangaroos, but a

passenger saw the possum when its eyes began to move and notified the gift shop's manager. "I imagine it was some of the plush animals that were for sale on the shelf and it decided to make its home with those," said Liam Bloomfield, an airport retail manager, in an interview with AP. "It wanted to blend in." As the possum drew more and more attention from staff and patrons, it "grew wary" and left the shop. Eventually, airport staff were able to remove the trespassing possum without harm to any party. No one knows how the possum got into the airport or

for how long it had been there. **HOTS** wonders: What other adventures has this possum had?

\* \* \* \* \*

**HOTS Record Auction...** The Guinness World Records added a new entry when a Flamin' Hot Cheeto in the shape of the Pokémon Charizard was sold at auction for \$87,840. The three-inch-long Cheetozard—as the manufactured snack phenomenon has been nicknamed—sold in March of last year, and has earned the record of highest price paid for a video game

likeness corn snack, UPI reports. The auction house responsible for the sale, Goldin Auctions said the item appealed to two groups of enthusiasts, which drew interested bidders. "Goldin specializes in rare and one-of-a-kind collectibles, and the Cheetozard is exactly this," Dave Amermanat, head of consignment for Goldin Auctions, told NCB's Today. "Part of what makes this item so fun and unique is that it bridges two fandoms: Pokémon and Cheetos." **HOTS** will look twice before munching on any snack foods after reading this!

## Hotels Look to Robots for Hospitality & Security Solutions

By Jordan Bradley

As technology advances, companies look for practical ways to apply new offerings. Hotels are no different.

Hotel EMC2, a member of Marriott International's Autograph Collection in Chicago, recently announced a newly updated overnight stay package and experience featuring the hotel's robotic attendants, Leo and Cleo.

"Inspired by the spirit of discovery," the hotel blends art and science throughout its programming, design aesthetic and guest offerings, according to a March 19 newsletter from Hotel EMC2. The hotel opened in July 2017 and started offering robotic room service the following year.

Recently, the hotel has updated its Bot Experience, an overnight stay package for guests of the hotel that includes a \$25 in-room dining credit, a take-home plush robot Leo, and "special surprise deliveries including cookies, milk or travel essentials"

delivered by either Leo or Cleo, directly to guests' rooms.

In a September 2025 hotel review from Time Out Chicago, Leo and Cleo were lauded for their charm and service.

"When not making deliveries to guest rooms, these adorable robots are stationed in the lobby in front of the elevators, assisting guest services staff by delivering room service orders and other necessities to hotel guests," the review said. "Each room is outfitted with an Amazon Echo Dot, and after I asked Alexa for a toothbrush, Leo arrived at my door less than ten minutes later to deliver



Robotic butlers Leo and Cleo provide customer service to guests at the Hotel EMC2 in Chicago. Photo courtesy of Katherine McConnell

a dental care kit, with my TV making a doorbell sound to announce his

Please turn to page 5

## Destinations International Launches International Mentorship Program

By Jonathan Trager

Destinations International has introduced a new international mentorship program exclusively for DI members that connects destination professionals across the global community.

The program uses the free Upnotch mentorship platform, whereby DI members can connect with multiple mentors and peers and create a personal "board of advisors" based on their goals, interests, and experience. The platform is available in the App store and Google Play stores.

"The Destinations International Mentorship Program is built for

destination organizations and partners around the world," according to DI. "It offers a centralized, secure space where professionals can connect, exchange industry insights, and build meaningful relationships. Designed to foster both connection and growth, the program enables structured, flexible, and high-impact mentorship experiences across all levels of the industry."

Members interested in participating as a mentor, mentee, or both can request to join the network and create a profile. After a member profile is built, the next three to four weeks are dedicated to proactively finding and initiating connections with potential mentors or mentees.

"Mentorship has long been one of the most powerful ways our industry develops talent and strengthens leadership," Don Welsh, President & CEO of DI, told *USAE*. "With the Destinations International Mentorship Program, we're creating a global space where professionals at every stage of their careers can connect, share insights and learn from one another. By intentionally fostering these relationships, we're helping build a more supportive, resilient and connected destination community for the future."

More than 70 DI members participated in a 2025 beta to test and iterate on the program. Find more information [here](#).

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# NEWS

## Brand USA Hosts Inaugural Travel Week South America in Rio de Janeiro

By Todd McElwee

A Brand USA delegation led by President & CEO Fred Dixon traveled to Rio de Janeiro from March 15–19 for the inaugural Brand USA Travel Week

South America.

The session brought together more than 50 U.S. trade and media exhibitors and nearly 80 travel buyers and media representatives from across Brazil, Colombia, Argentina,

Chile, and Perú.

Brand USA said the region accounts for 16% of total overseas visitors to the United States, making it the third largest global supplier for inbound travel. Brazil is the largest source market with 1.9 million arrivals in 2025, and Brazilian leisure travelers spend an average of \$3,442 per trip.

“South America is a strategically important region for inbound leisure and business travel to the United States,” said Dixon. “According to the latest data, travelers from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Peru generated \$20 billion in visitor spending across the United States, underscoring the tremendous economic value of this market. With travel demand continuing to grow across the region, we expect that

Throughout the week, participants engaged in pre-scheduled business meetings, enrichment sessions, and networking opportunities designed to deepen market understanding, strengthen partnerships, and support the development of travel experiences that inspire future visitation to the United States. The program also included a C-suite market immersion designed to provide senior executives with

deeper insight into the South American travel landscape.

“South America represents a highly engaged and evolving travel audience for the United States,” said Malcolm Smith, Sr. Vice President, Global Markets and Chief Trade and Product Development Officer, Brand USA. “Events like Travel Week South

**“South America represents a highly engaged and evolving travel audience for the United States,” said Malcolm Smith, Sr. Vice President, Global Markets and Chief Trade and Product Development Officer, Brand USA.**

America help ensure our partners are well positioned to connect with these travelers and showcase the incredible experiences available across the United States.”

Participating destinations include Visit Fairfax, Greater Miami CVB, Visit Orlando, and the Colorado Tourism Office.

The next edition of the program will take place in Amsterdam for the U.K. and Europe markets September 28 to October 1.



Fred Dixon, President & CEO, Brand USA, speaks in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, at the inaugural Brand USA Travel Week South America, March 15–19. Photo by Brand USA

## Wolseley Hotels to Open Flagship Property in NYC

By Jordan Bradley

The Wolseley Hotel brand will open its first property for the brand in New York City, the company announced in mid-March.

The hotel will open in early 2027 in Midtown Manhattan near Bryant Park.

The brand takes its name, aesthetic and hospitality philosophy from the famed Wolseley restaurant in London’s Piccadilly, “renowned for its Art Deco elegance, refined hospitality, and enduring appeal as a gathering place for cultural, business, and civic leaders,” the company said.

The Wolseley New York will offer guests a 76-room hotel where the “legacy” of the hotel’s namesake “will

be reinterpreted through a distinctly cosmopolitan lens—sophisticated yet welcoming, grand yet intimate,” Wolseley Hotels said.

The hotel will also have its own Wolseley restaurant—the first in the United States. “Serving as the social centre of the hotel, the restaurant will carry forward the grand café tradition and polished European sensibility established by The Wolseley on Piccadilly, offering all-day dining, signature cocktails, and a vibrant yet refined atmosphere,” the hotel company said.

Alongside the restaurant, the Wolseley hotel will have a cellar-level speakeasy bar “designed to provide a more discreet and atmospheric setting,” and a wellness center “that reflects the brand’s commitment to holistic luxury and guest comfort,” Wolseley Hotels said.

The Wolseley Hotels brand belongs to the Minor Hotels portfolio of brands, and the Wolseley New York will be the first in a global collection of luxury hotels. The brand expects to open hotels in cities across Europe, North America, Asia and the Middle East.

impact to increase even further in the years ahead, making collaboration with our partners here more important than ever.”

Travel trade participation included 22 organizations from Brazil, 20 from Colombia, 10 from Argentina, and four each from Chile and Peru, along with two regional online travel agencies. The media program featured nine outlets from Brazil, three from Argentina, two from Colombia, and one each from Chile and Peru.

## ASAE Letter

*continued from page 1*

The letter referenced recent economic impact research conducted for ASAE by Oxford Economics highlighting the scale of the association sector’s contributions. Each year, more than 272,000 association meetings and events attract nearly 52 million participants, directly support approximately 342,000 jobs, and generate \$42 billion in spending in communities across the nation, it said. ASAE also noted that activity supports hotels, restaurants, convention centers, transportation providers, and countless small businesses in destinations of all sizes.

“A stable and reliable travel system is essential to sustaining the economic and professional benefits generated by association meetings and events,” the letter said. “We therefore respectfully call on Congress to take immediate action to fully fund DHS and ensure that TSA and other critical agencies have the resources necessary to maintain uninterrupted operations.”

Mason asked alert readers to take a moment and share ASAE’s letter with their Members of Congress and reinforce the need to fund DHS and support TSA’s essential role in the nation’s travel system.

Find more information [here](#).



A rendering of the exterior of the forthcoming Wolseley Hotel New York

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## Industry Movers



**Chelan Goonetilleke** is the new General Manager of Four Seasons Hotel Toronto. He's transferring from Four Seasons Resort and Residences Whistler, where he was the general manager. His career with Four Seasons began in 2007 as senior director of marketing for the brand's resorts in Mauritius and Seychelles. His journey later took him to Dubai, where he oversaw marketing for Four Seasons Resort Dubai at Jumeirah Beach.



**Katrine Graugaard** has been appointed as RX's Global Head of Corporate Communications. She brings more than 20 years of international communications experience across multi-market organizations. She joins RX from Wavemaker, part of WPP, where she served as the global head of marketing and communications. In her new role at RX, Katrine will lead the global communications strategy, strengthen internal and external narratives and support the leadership team.



**Nader A. Nadershahi, D.D.S.**, has been named Executive Director of the American Dental Association (ADA). Dr. Nadershahi was the association's senior vice president of education and professional affairs. Prior to joining the ADA staff in June 2025, he spent nine years as dean of the University of the Pacific Arthur A. Dugoni School of Dentistry in San Francisco. He was chair of the American Dental Education Association.



**Tayna Zasada** is now the Director of Sales, Marketing and Events at the Hyatt Regency Lake Washington at Seattle's Southport. Zasada was a special events intern with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metro Milwaukee. She was a sales manager at the Hyatt Regency Dallas, where she was part of the 2019 Sales Team of the Year. At the Hyatt Regency DFW she was associate director of sales.

[See More Industry Movers](#)

## Robots

*continued from page 3*  
arrival. Surreal, but fun."

Meanwhile, a company based in Singapore, YY Group Holding Limited, has selected Las Vegas as a testing ground for a pilot program implementing robots for security and hospitality purposes.

The company will spend around a year working in collaboration with a local robotics company to identify robotic solutions for improving oper-

ational efficiency, service delivery and security in hospitality environments, the company said on March 16.

"Las Vegas attracts tens of millions of visitors annually, making it one of the most active hospitality hubs globally," YY Group said in the release, adding that it "believes robotics may play an increasingly important role in helping hotels and commercial properties support staff, improve operational efficiency, and enhance security coverage."

While conducting the pilot program,

YY Group and its Las Vegas partner will look for ways for robots to support hospitality staff with hotel operations, guest services, and security monitoring.

YY Group has had success deploying robotic solutions at hospitality ventures in Malaysia and Singapore, according to the company's chairman, founder and CEO, Mike Fu, and the company is looking for ways to expand into other markets.

"Robotics is rapidly becoming an important part of our business," said

Fu. "We have already begun deploying robotics solutions in Malaysia and Singapore, including some of the finest hotels in the world. Given Las Vegas' position as the entertainment capital of the world, it is a natural next step for us to test our robotics products in this dynamic market. We believe the city provides an ideal environment to demonstrate how robotics can support hospitality operations and enhance security services at scale."

## AHLA

*continued from page 1*

23 years, and the proposal has faced scrutiny and backlash from local businesses, property owners, and city representatives.

"At a time when New Yorkers are already grappling with an affordability crisis, dipping into rainy day reserves and proposing significant property tax increases should not be on the table whatsoever," New York City Council Speaker Julie Menin said. "The Council believes there are additional areas of savings and revenue that deserve careful scrutiny before increasing the burden on small property owners and neighborhood small businesses, which could worsen the affordability crisis."

Now, AHLA is stepping up to speak out against the potential tax increase.

The association's main concern, it said in testimony given to the New York City Council on March 17, is the tax increase could increase operating costs for hotels and negatively impact small hotel businesses and jobs

throughout New York City.

"Tax proposals that increase the corporate tax and changes to the pass-through entity tax (PTET) will affect countless partnerships and S corporations that are closer to Main Street than Wall Street—effectively a tax increase on small businesses," said Sarah Bratko, Vice President and Policy Counsel for AHLA. "This will drive up prices for everyone, including other businesses that use these services and local residents."

Hotels in New York City generate approximately \$1,168 in visitor spending per room night, according to AHLA research, and are expected to contribute around \$4.9 billion in local, state and federal tax revenue this year.

However, Bratko said the potential increased property tax could "pose

real challenges to the industry," she said, and that hoteliers "alone will not be able to absorb this tax without damaging property values." Already, hoteliers in NYC are facing increased

operating costs as a result of the 2021 Hotel Permitting ordinance and the 2024 Safe Hotel Act, AHLA said.

Bratko pointed to San Francisco "where a struggling hotel industry was confronted with ever increasing taxes and unrealistic policy decisions" that, alongside the challenges of the pandemic, saw "many businesses, including major hotels" close. "Only after several years of closures did the city" approve policy measures "to overhaul business taxes in a way that created a fairer and more resilient system," she said.

Bratko also pointed to Los Angeles

**The association's main concern, it said in testimony given to the New York City Council on March 17, is the tax increase could increase operating costs for hotels and negatively impact small hotel businesses and jobs throughout New York City.**

as a "cautionary" tale.

"While we understand the City is facing significant financial challenges, there are several cautionary tales of other markets looking to solve its fiscal shortfalls by increasing taxes on local businesses. Los Angeles, once a thriving hotel market, is faced with similar challenges," Bratko said. "After years of enacting anti-hotel policies and tax increases, recent surveys show widespread concern about the city's hotel industry. After the City Council passed an extreme labor mandate in 2025, 6% of the hotel workforce has been laid off due to price pressures, with 62% of surveyed hotels saying that they plan to reduce staff hours throughout 2026."

Hotels across the country have seen decreased international demand, AHLA said. With the city's budget yet to be finalized, AHLA President and CEO Rosanna Maietta said "it is essential that policymakers avoid imposing additional burdens that could slow the industry's recovery" as a healthy hotel sector "is vital to the city's broader economic health."

## Rising Stars

### Spotlight on Industry Rising Star Casey Richman

By Jonathan Trager

One could say that jumping into the association industry was natural for Casey Richman, MPH, Director of Programs & Marketing for the International Society for the Study of Trauma and Dissociation and recipient of ASAE's 2025 Future Leaders Development Scholarship.

Starting from when she was in third grade, Richman and her sister—who's two years older—participated on a competitive jump rope team while growing up in their rural community in Indiana. The pair performed in state and regional competitions and did halftime shows at basketball games.

"It was a lot of fun," Richman told USAE. "We got medals from different competitions. It was kind of a family thing—our parents would travel with us when we went different places."

Post-jump rope career, Richman attended Indiana's Ball State University as an undergraduate and discovered she was "incredibly passionate about mental health and increasing access to services" but wasn't drawn to working

with clients and doing counseling. Upon discovering the public health field, she enrolled in the George Washington University in Washington, D.C., to pursue her master's degree in public health and worked for a local health department doing Covid-19 contact tracing.

"It helped me learn about the importance of community and being able to communicate with people and understanding where they're coming from and different resources they have in communities," said Richman.

Also during graduate school, Richman joined the American Public Health Association—her first interaction with association space—and volunteered as a student/community liaison.

"That's something I bring to the organization that I appreciate a lot," Richman said. "One of the favorite things I do is understand member feedback and listen to their concerns and come up with creative solutions to meet those needs."

It was Richman's husband, Luke, who encouraged her to apply for the ASAE 2025 Future Leaders Develop-

ment Scholarship while she was contemplating whether to do it. When she was named a recipient, there was "definitely a moment of disbelief."

"I had to check to make sure it wasn't spam that got hold of my information," she joked. "It was a valuable lesson that you should always take chances on things. Part of me didn't know I'd get it, but I figured the worst that could happen is being told no. It's a valuable lesson in not being afraid to take chances and trying."

Richman said she owes a lot to the great mentors she's had within the association space.

"My supervisor [Mary Pat Hanlin] has been incredibly encouraging and supportive of me for all the opportunities and professional development I've been able to take on, so I'm grateful for that," said Richman. "I'm also grateful for all of the strong



female leaders I've been able to meet and who are doing such great things. They inspire me and make me believe I'm able to accomplish great things and support our members and community as well."

### Association Forum Announces 2026 Honors Award Recipients

By Todd McElwee

Association Forum's annual Honors Gala is set for June 25 at The Old Post Office in Chicago. **Gregory Heidrich, NACD-DC**, CEO of the Society of Actuaries (SOA), is being presented with the Samuel B. Shapiro Award for Chief Staff Executive Achievement—powered by Atlanta CVB, which is Association Forum's highest honor.

"Association Forum Honors Awards program celebrates the people who push our profession forward every day," said Artesha Moore, FASAE, CAE, President & CEO of Association Forum. "Our honorees are leaders who challenge the status quo, uplift their communities, and demonstrate the power of associations to create real impact. It is truly inspiring to recognize individuals and organizations who are shaping what the future of our profession looks like."

Heidrich is being recognized for his exceptional leadership, noteworthy contributions to the association profession, and commitment to advancing innovation and professional development, organizers said. In September, SOA announced his intention to retire the following summer.

Heidrich led the organization since 2007. Accomplishments noted by SOA included the creation of the Man In: The Men's Leadership Experience, which will debut in September.

The John C. Thiel Distinguished Service Award honors outstanding volunteer service to Association Forum. The 2026 recipient, **Nikki Palluzzi, CAE**, Sr. Director of Membership, Illinois CPA Society, is recognized for her dedication, mentorship, and long-standing contributions to the association community.

**Joanna Leon**, Director of Membership & Chapters, MHI and Managing Director of MHI-CICMHE, is being honored with the Association Professional Achievement Award—Powered by Choose Chicago. The award is presented to an association professional member for exemplary service and achievement. Leon is being celebrated for her leadership, commitment to growth, and impactful contributions to her organization and the broader profession.

The Chris Mahaffey Inspiring Leader Award—Powered by Visit Anchorage recognizes an individual who fosters a culture of engagement, motivation, and achievement. **Tammy Kwiatkowski, CAE, FHIMSS**, Senior Director of Global Community Operations, Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society (HIMSS), is being honored for her leadership, dedication to team development, and commitment to excellence.

The Welcoming Environment Organizational Award—Powered by Visit KC is presented to an association demon-

strating excellence in fostering an inclusive and welcoming culture. This year's recipient is the **Association of African American Financial Advisors**. Under the leadership of CEO Sheena Gray, the organization has implemented initiatives that promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and psychological safety for staff and members.

"Each of these honorees truly represents the very best of our community—leaders who show up, give

generously of their time, talent, and expertise, and make a real impact," said Michelle Mills Clement, FASAE, CAE, RCE, Association Forum Board Chair and CEO of the Chicago Association of REALTORS. "Their dedication strengthens our profession and is a powerful reminder of the role associations play in supporting industries, advancing knowledge, and bringing people together."

Find more information [here](#).

### BLLA Announces Annual Boutique Hotel Investment Conference

By Jordan Bradley

The Boutique and Luxury Lodging Association (BLLA) will host its annual Boutique Hotel Investment Conference on June 3 in New York City, the association announced on March 17.

This year, the BLLA partnered with Convene Hospitality Group (CHG) to put on the next edition of the conference, which "has served as the annual gathering point for the owners, investors, developers, and operators who have defined and driven the boutique hotel movement" since 2013, the association said.

"We have watched this sector go from underestimated to undeniable,"

said BLLA founder and CEO Frances Kiradjian. "The investors, the developers, and the capital that once looked past independent hotels are now chasing them. Convene represents the next frontier of that story—hospitality thinking applied beyond the hotel walls, and we could not be more excited to tell it together on June third."

The 2026 Boutique Hotel Investment Conference will be held at CHG's 237 Park meetings and event venue.

The one-day conference programming "examines the forces reshaping boutique hospitality from both the capital and cultural sides," BLLA said, including shifting financing struc-

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# Scene At Association Forum Women's Executive Forum



# NEWS

## Dean Dennis Tapped as GM of Columbus Convention Center

By Jonathan Trager

Dean Dennis, CVE, has been appointed General Manager of the Greater Columbus Convention Center (GCCC) in Ohio, venue manager Legends Global announced on March 16.

Dennis succeeds John Page in the top leadership role at the GCCC, who has stepped into a new position of regional vice president of venue operations for Legends Global.

Dennis boasts more than 30 years of experience leading convention centers and public assembly venues across North America. He comes to Columbus from Memphis, Tennessee, where he most recently served as president and general manager of the

Renasant Convention Center and Cannon Center for the Performing Arts.

“I am honored to join the team at the Greater Columbus Convention Center and Legends Global,” said Dennis. “Columbus is a vibrant, growing destination with a reputation for excellence in the hospitality industry. I look forward to working with our partners and the community to build upon this facility’s success and continue delivering world-class experiences for our guests.”

Dennis’ career includes senior leadership roles with Global Spectrum/Spectra, where he led venue expansion and renovation projects, strengthened sales and financial performance, and managed the opening of new conven-

tion centers and arenas. He also brings destination organization experience to the position, having previously served in a senior leadership role with the Pueblo CVB in Colorado.

“Dean brings an impressive track record in venue management and a strong reputation in the convention center industry,” said Josh Kritzler, President of North American Venues & Content for Legends Global. “His extensive experience and proven operational expertise will serve the Greater Columbus Convention Center and the community well. We look forward to his leadership as the venue continues to grow and deliver exceptional experiences for guests and clients.”



Dean Dennis

## NPCA Joins Lawsuit Challenges Administration’s Public Lands Measures in Alaska

By Todd McElwee

The National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) is one of 10 groups that sued the Interior Department this month for what plaintiffs claim is the agency’s unlawful removing of federal protections over public lands in Alaska.

On February 20, Interior Secretary Doug Burgum revoked Public Land Orders 5150 and 5180 for what Alaskan Gov. Mike Dunleavy said is the expansion of economic development opportunities on roughly 2.1 million acres.

NPCA said the lands had been protected for more than 50 years and are subject to federal oversight meant to ensure Arctic health and a stable corridor for the Dalton Highway and Trans-Alaska Pipeline.

The lawsuit, filed in the U.S. District Court in Anchorage, asserts the revocation violated the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Federal Land Policy and Management Act, and National Environmental Policy Act, by failing to meet legal obligations to protect land, wildlife,

waterways, subsistence use, and communities. The plaintiffs seek the reinstatement of Public Land Orders 5150 and 5180 and other additional measures.

“NPCA rejects the administration’s latest attempt to give away America’s public lands and force through the speculative Ambler industrial mining road,” said Jim Adams, Sr. Alaska Director, National Parks Conservation Association. “Revoking PLO 5150 and 5180 would allow for the transfer of 2.1 million acres of priceless public lands and their waterways and wildlife to the state of Alaska.”

“It’s a blatant effort to avoid national environmental laws to allow construction of a road that will enrich foreign mining companies and harm wild lands, Alaska Native communities, and America’s conservation legacy. Ending these public land orders also exposes the entire eastern side of Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve to state management practices along its border that devalue park wildlife and the needs of rural residents.”

The Department of Interior’s announcement said the move helps Alaska to advance its remaining land entitlements under the Alaska Statehood Act. This action allows approximately 2.1 million acres of “topfiled” land (land previously unavailable for state selection but which Alaska has long sought to acquire), to become effective state selections. Referencing

information from the state, Google said topfiled land refers to state-selected land currently under federal restriction (such as national parks or refuges) that automatically transfers to state ownership if the restriction is lifted.

“President Trump was clear—promises made are promises kept and this decision is about unlocking opportunity for American Energy Dominance to lower costs for all American families,” said Burgum. “By opening these lands, we are empowering Alaska to chart its own course and develop energy, minerals and infrastructure that strengthen America’s security and prosperity.”

NPCA said handing over the protected federal lands to the state benefits mining interests and industrial projects like the proposed Ambler mining road will be damaging. It added Burgum made the decision without taking any public comments and held no hearings in affected local communities, despite acknowledging that this land giveaway would have severe environmental impacts and harm subsistence users.

Nonprofit law firm Trustees for Alaska is also representing Northern Alaska Environmental Center, Alaska Community Action on Toxics, Alaska Wildlife Alliance, Alaska Wilderness League, Center for Biological Diversity, Earthworks, Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society, and Winter Wildlands Alliance.

hospitality, capital, real estate, and experience start to disappear.”

For CHG CEO and co-founder Ryan Simonetti, the partnership between CHG and BLLA makes sense, given BLLA’s dedication to being at the forefront of the boutique hospitality industry and the shifting trends in commercial real estate.

“Hospitality is a fundamental driver of value in commercial real estate today,” said Simonetti. “We’re seeing the boutique mindset traditionally reserved for hotels successfully migrate into non-traditional venues

like office towers, mixed-use developments, and special event venues. At CHG, we’re leaning into that shift, and there’s a lot we can learn from one another. I look forward to discussing how we can collectively explore new industry territory with the visionaries at BLLA.”

Find more information about the event [here](#).

## BLLA

continued from page 6

tures, sustainable growth models, and trends in guest experiences such as bar culture, sauna culture, and experience-driven movements influencing desires from guests.

Following the day’s conference events, BLLA said NeueHouse Madison Square, a coworking space and member of CHG’s extended portfolio, will host an evening of events to compliment the conference, and further facilitate relationship building and conversation.

“The most interesting deals we have seen come out of this conference were never just hotel deals,” said Ariela Kiradjian, Partner and COO at BLLA. “They started as a conversation between two people who had never been in the same room before, That is what we are building toward—a conference where the boundaries between

**The 2026 Boutique Hotel Investment Conference will be held at CHG’s 237 Park meetings and event venue.**

# NEWS

## Hilton Announces Exclusive Agreement with Yotel

By Jordan Bradley

Hilton and Yotel, an independent and design-led hotel company, have signed an exclusive agreement bringing Yotel into the fold of Hilton's new Select by Hilton brand of properties.

Yotel will be the first independent brand to join Hilton's newly established Select by Hilton category, Hilton said.

Hilton's new Select by Hilton portfolio is "designed to grow into a brand that creates new ways to stay for guests, with the trust, confidence, and perks they expect from Hilton," the company said. "High-quality, established hotel brands that join Select by Hilton will retain their own identity and brand management while they connect to the award-winning Hilton Honors loyalty program and enjoy the benefits of Hilton's superior distribution and technology

platforms."

Launched in 2007, Yotel is a global hotel group head-quartered in London with 23 hotels currently open in major cities like New York Tokyo, Amsterdam, Glasgow, Singapore and more that prioritizes efficiency of design and tech-forward innovations. The company also has a collection of airport hotels called Yotelair in major airports around the world.

Hilton officials said the exclusive agreement with Yotel will offer guests new ways to stay in key global markets, a growing priority for the hotel company.

"The addition of Yotel to Hilton's network is the latest example of our commitment to capital efficient growth through a relationship that is both complementary to our existing brand portfolio and offers guests thoughtfully designed, sleek new ways to stay with Hilton in key urban loca-



tions around the world," said Christian Charnaux, Executive Vice President and Chief Development Officer at Hilton. "This agreement further strengthens our network effect by connecting a beloved independent brand like Yotel into the powerful Hilton Honors network and commercial distribution system, while preserving what makes the brand unique."

For Yotel, the partnership with Hilton brings a big opportunity for growth.

"Hilton brings unmatched global distribution and loyalty scale to our brand and business," said Phil Andreopoulos, CEO of Yotel. "Yotel's relationship with Hilton allows us to expand our reach while staying true to who we are. What changes for Yotel is access—not identity—in a capital-light, and scalable way."

Yotel hotel stays will be available to book through Hilton's booking channels later this year, the company said.

## Around Associations

**PCMA Capital Chapter Hosting Burnout Webinar...** On March 24, Dr. Kristen Eccleston will facilitate the PCMA Capital Chapter's virtual lunch and learn session "Beyond Burnout: How to Rebuild Cognitive Capacity for Sustainable Performance."

Speaking about addressing burnout, the chapter said Eccleston takes a different approach by not lecturing people about work-life balance.

"She teaches them how to recognize the brain's early warning signals and intervene before cognitive capacity collapses," the chapter said. "Not motivation. Regulation."

Find more information [here](#).

**New Research From GBTA and ALTOUR Shows Progress and Gaps in North America Business Travel Programs...** The State of Corporate Travel Policies: U.S. and Canada 2025, released earlier this month by the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA) in partnership with global travel management company ALTOUR, shows companies are working to enhance the employee traveler experience via technology and other measures, but room for improvement remains.

"Travel policies are evolving in a way that reflects today's realities and responsible travel decisions," said Suzanne Neufang, CEO of GBTA. "This research shows organizations are evolving through technology and reassessing their policies through a more inclusive lens, along with

strengthening the traveler experience. At the same time, the gaps identified in the research gives our industry a roadmap for continued improvement."

Findings include:

- 32% of travel managers report their company's travel policy is stricter today than it was three years ago, while only 5% say theirs has become more lenient.

- 51% of travel policies exceed 10 pages, and 24% run longer than 20 pages. Only 14% of travel managers say their policies have gotten shorter in the past three years.

- 64% of travel managers express interest in AI-generated video explainers that summarize key policy elements.

Gabe Rizzi, President of ALTOUR said: "Travelers want clarity, flexibility and a support system that helps them stay in policy—and companies want visibility and consistency. Travel policies have been too complex for too long. There is a clear opportunity for AI to distill key details and improve compliance. This study shows that when travel programs simplify communication, embrace technology and create policies that reflect traveler needs, everyone wins."

The report findings are based on an online survey of 168 corporate travel managers in the United States and Canada conducted November 19 to December 10.

Find more information [here](#).

## Man Convicted of Murder at Indy Convention Center

By Jonathan Trager

A Marion County, Indiana jury has convicted a man of murdering a co-worker inside the Indiana Convention Center on September 11, 2024.

Brian Fulton, 34, was found guilty of murder in the death of Al Gosnell, 58, following a trial that centered on a violent confrontation between the two men at the downtown Indianapolis venue. The verdict was returned on March 18 quickly after the two-day trial concluded.

According to evidence presented at trial, Fulton attacked Gosnell during an altercation, stabbing him with a box cutter and causing fatal injuries. Emergency responders pronounced Gosnell dead at the scene.

At the time of the attack, both men worked inside the convention center. Fulton was a stagehand and Gosnell was a sound and light technician.

Prosecutors argued that Fulton

acted with intent and the nature of the attack demonstrated clear premeditation. They presented forensic evidence and witness testimony placing Fulton at the scene and linking him directly to the killing.

When confronted by police officers soon afterward, Fulton had said he worked with the CIA and had just "neutralized an international terrorist threat."

Defense attorneys challenged the prosecution's version of events, questioning the reliability of witness accounts and suggesting the confrontation escalated quickly. They argued that the evidence didn't support a finding of intentional murder.

The Indiana Convention Center, one of the city's largest event spaces, remained open following the incident, though officials said security procedures were reviewed in the aftermath of the killing.

Fulton faces a sentence of up to 65 years in prison under Indiana law. A sentencing hearing has been set for April 22.

Sponsored Content

# Identity is Defined by Imagination, Belief and Repetition



**DEK:** “Possibility begins the moment you decide who you are becoming, regardless of where you are standing,” says Magie Cook, a keynote speaker at MPI’s World Education Congress, June 2-4 in San Antonio.

By Blair Potter

Dr. Magie Cook spent the first 18 years of her life behind barbed wire in an orphanage. But mentally, she refused to live there.

“I built a small cave on a mountain canyon near the orphanage. That cave became my sanctuary,” she says. “In that space, I would future cast. I would imagine myself as already successful. I would think and feel as if I was already living in a place without fear.”

Cook, CEO and founder of Magie Cook International and a keynote speaker at MPI’s 2026 World Education Congress (WEC), June 2-4 in San Antonio, says that although she had never lived outside the fence, she rehearsed her future identity daily. Her WEC keynote is sponsored by Monterey Meetings in partnership with The Keynote Curators.

“That experience taught me that identity is not defined by environment,” she says. “It is defined by imagination, belief and repetition. Possibility begins the moment you decide who you are becoming, regardless of where you are standing.”

Cook, a visionary entrepreneur, internationally recognized speaker and expert in business and personal development who will help WEC at-

tendees reframe adversity as a catalyst for strategic advantage, founded All Natural Fresh Salsas & Dips with just \$800 and later sold it alongside Garden Fresh to Campbell’s Soup for \$231 million. She says her purpose and her why at the beginning was fueled by something very personal.

## Awareness transforms us

“My father once told me that I would never amount to anything, that I would die in prison and with AIDS. Those were his exact words. I was on fire to prove him wrong,” she says. “But what I later realized is that I was building from fear. Fear can push you, but it can only take you so far. When my father passed away, I had a defining moment. I asked myself, ‘Who am I going to prove wrong now?’ That question changed everything. I understood that my salsa company was not the destination. It was a steppingstone. It was preparing me for something bigger.”

That was also the moment she changed her name from “Maggie” to “Magie.”

“It symbolized identity,” she says. “I was no longer building to prove someone wrong. I was building to become who I was meant to be.”

While Cook believes adversity refines us, rather than diminishes us, she says adversity alone is not transforming.

“Awareness transforms us,” she says. “When most people face a setback, they get stuck in the problem. They replay the pain instead of reframing the meaning. I train myself to ask

powerful questions: ‘What are three assumptions I am making about this setback?’ ‘What if the opposite were true?’ ‘What is one thing I can control right now?’ and ‘Who will I become based on the choice I make next?’”

The difference, according to Cook, is understanding that while we can’t always control what happens to us, we always control who we become because of it.

“Transformation begins the moment we choose identity over circumstance,” she says.

## Rise, rebuild and reimagine

Cook developed the 3R Framework—Resourceful, Resilient and Relentless—to “rise, rebuild and reimagine” who she was and who she can be because her entire life has been a practice of those three core behaviors.

“When I looked back at the patterns that led to success in both my personal life and my business, I realized those three qualities were always present,” she says. “Resourcefulness means asking, ‘What do I have right now that I can use?’ Resilience means deciding, ‘This will not define me.’ Relentlessness means committing to move forward even when it is uncomfortable. Anyone can begin applying the 3R Framework immediately. In a challenge, identify one resource you still have, decide who you are choosing to be in this moment and take one relentless action forward, no matter how small. Momentum follows identity.”

So how does one build from a place of identity instead of a place of fear? Cook believes it’s important to understand that your circumstances are temporary, but your identity is powerful.

“Instead of asking, ‘How do I get out of this?’ ask, ‘Who do I need to become to rise above this?’ and step into the role with inspired action,” she says. “Focus on becoming resourceful with what you have, resilient in the face of rejection and relentless in consistent action. You do not need perfect conditions. You need a clear identity and daily disciplined action. Small courageous steps, repeated consistently, compound into transformation.”

## Bridging inspiration and action

We’re introducing an exciting new feature to every general session at WEC 2026: an “Inside the Industry” panel

of peers featuring industry commentators live onstage.

“After each keynote or featured speaker, our commentators will ask the kinds of clarifying, practical questions that lead to actionable insights from inside and outside the business event industry,” says Jessie States, vice president of MPI Consulting. “The format is designed to bridge inspiration and action. The commentators’ desk will translate ideas and inspiration into clear next steps, applicable takeaways and realworld context.”

The stage design will feature a dynamic environment that feels more interactive, modern and conversational than in past years.

“The concept supports our aim to exchange passive inspiration with active industry dialogue—and ensure participants leave each general session with deeper clarity, more relevance and tangible actions they can implement right away,” States says.

The time was right to make this general session update based on data that says audiences need something different.

“Last year, we utilized Bishop-McCann’s Joy Index during our general sessions to determine minute-by-minute engagement and sentiment using biometric measurements and facial recognition software,” States says. “The results confirmed what we already believed: Our sessions scored highly, but in order to further deliver sustained engagement, we need to continue to refine the experience. Our ‘Inside the Industry’ commentators will ensure our general sessions are emotionally resonant and immediately actionable.”

Magie Cook looks forward to delivering a message that is both deeply personal and universally applicable at MPI’s 2026 World Education Congress (WEC) in San Antonio, June 2-4, a place that holds special meaning for her because it represents resilience, history and strength.

