



USAE writer Jordan Bradley took a riding lesson on April 2 from trainer Scott Scheyli with Arabian horse Shl'mVaguelySurprised (also known as JT) in Tucson, Arizona. She recounts the full experience in the story below.

Colorado Town of Ridgeway Sues Hotel Owner Alleges Code Violation and Tax Dodging

By Jordan Bradley

The mountain town of Ridgway, Colorado, is suing the owner of a hotel who agreed to house construction crews working on the site of a forthcoming \$1 billion Four Seasons resort slated for a nearby town.

Town officials allege the contract signed by the owner of the 52-room MTN Lodge to house construction workers through 2031 violates zoning permissions for the hotel, and the establishment is attempting to get out of paying hotel occupancy and sales taxes. The town filed the lawsuit in late March.

The city's town council held a special meeting on March 25 to convene with the town attorney "for the purpose of receiving legal advice on a specific legal question" in an ongoing conversation between Ridgway officials and MTN Lodge representatives, according to the Ridgway town council's meeting agenda.

Two days later, the town filed the lawsuit against Ridgway Suites LLC, which owns the lodge, for allegedly violating the town's municipal code

Please turn to page 4

USAExperiences: A Meet-and-Greet with Arabian Horses

By Jordan Bradley

Horses are intimidating. They're big, and they're sometimes unpredictable. I'm speaking from personal experience. As a child, I learned quickly to be wary of the large beasts, thanks, in large part, to my mom's horse, Tasmo—as in "Tasmanian devil." To say the least about that: the

name fit the horse.

So when I spoke with Taryl O'Shea, incoming Executive Director of the Arabian Horse Association for the April 6 edition of Women Leading the Way, I was intrigued by O'Shea's description of the Arabian horses. With a reputation for being temperamental and flighty, the breed is deeply misunderstood, she told me.

Through the course of our interview, O'Shea revealed that she resides in Scottsdale, just a quick jump across the Sonoran Desert from my home in Tucson. To support the article, O'Shea offered to connect me with an Arabian horse trainer in Tucson, and I happily accepted.

As serendipity would have it, O'Shea

Please turn to page 7

ASAE Research Foundation, MPI Foundation Release Neuroinclusion Study

By Todd McElwee

The ASAE Research Foundation, in partnership with the MPI Foundation, announced on April 8 the release of a new study examining neuroinclusion within the association community.

Outcomes include only one-third of staff involved in meetings and events report giving significant consideration to neurodivergent needs and a disconnect between staff and members.

"This research represents an important step forward in helping associations move from awareness to action," said Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE, AAip, President & CEO, ASAE. "Creating environments where every individual can fully participate and thrive is not just a value—it's a responsibility."

Research was conducted in collaboration with Burson and The Neu Project and released during Neurodiversity

Please turn to page 6

Inside

Page 3
EIC Opens Hall of Leaders and Global Awards Nominations

Page 4
Salt Lake Council Vetoes Rezoning for Proposed Hotel Project

Page 5
Industry Movers

Page 6
MPI Shaking Up WEC Mainstage in San Antonio

Page 7
Spotlight on Industry Rising Star Micaela Nardino

American Heart Association and Others Holding CPR Training at NFL Draft

By Todd McElwee

The NFL Draft has always been a life-changing moment for selected players and their loved ones. This year's event in Pittsburgh can be a lifesaving moment for fans.

On April 24, the American Heart Association and NFL along with Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin's Chasing M's Foundation, will welcome thousands to the field at Acrisure Stadium to be

trained in Hands-Only CPR at the NFL Draft.

"Every second matters when someone experiences cardiac arrest and knowing how to perform CPR can be the difference between life and death," said Nancy Brown, CEO of the American Heart Association. "By bringing thousands of people together at the NFL Draft, we're teaming up with the league and Damar Hamlin to equip individuals

Please turn to page 4



Georgia World
Congress Center

HOSPITALITY THAT **WELCOMES THE WORLD.**

Learn more at gwcca.org

HOTS

HOTS Clutter in the Cosmos... HOTS closely followed the Artemis II mission as the crew flew farther into space than anyone before. Yet, as the April 9 front page photo of the Wall Street Journal showed, no matter how far away an astronaut or anyone else is from home, there's always clutter. The photo shows astronauts surrounded by papers, tablets, cases and more. Minus the price tag, the spaceship is no different than an office, family home or college dorm when it comes to clutter. HOTS would like to think if there is intelligent living beings

somewhere out there, their spaces are joyously cluttered as well.

✧ ✧ ✧ ✧ ✧

HOTS Running While Record-Making... A woman from Arkansas has earned a new Guinness World Record for wearing the most t-shirts while running a half-marathon, UPI reports. Meredith Smith ran the Fort Smith Half Marathon on March 30, 2025,

while wearing 55 T-shirts, earning her world record title. Guinness confirmed the record on April 7. Smith told Guinness her attempt was meant to honor and symbolize her weight loss journey. Throughout her journey, Smith has completed more than 80 races. "Completing a running record was particularly special to me, as I would not have thought it possible when I began running in 2013 as a way

to lose weight," Smith told Guinness World Records. "Trying to set this record by adding weight back on to my body via T-shirts was like stepping back into my own shoes to physically see how far I've come." Smith wore up to 80 T-shirts—one for each pound she lost—while training for her record attempt. HOTS thinks that's one full-circle moment!

ASAE Hosting Three Destination Demo Days

By Todd McElwee

Starting in May, ASAE is rolling out Destination Demo Days, interactive programs comprised of a trio of sessions designed to help meeting planners simplify the initial stages of site selection.

"ASAE believes Destination Demo Days is the right program at the right time because it responds directly to how meeting planners are evaluating destinations today," John Bacon, Vice President, Sales & Partner Experience, ASAE, told *USAE*.

Modeled after ASAE's Technology

Demo Day format, ASAE compared its latest offering to a "virtual FAM experience" built for when planners are narrowing options and deciding where to focus next. Planners can explore and compare multiple destinations in one setting, ask questions in real time, and gain additional information.

The series kicks off May 6 with small meetings. Mid-size meetings and large/city-wide meetings follow on June 9 and July 1, respectively.

Bacon said: "Planners need efficient, low-friction ways to research options early, compare cities using consistent criteria, and identify the

best fit for meetings of different sizes. Destination Demo Days was built to meet that need, giving planners a live, interactive format to explore destinations before the formal RFP stage, while giving destinations meaningful visibility at the moment the short lists are being built. Based on planner feedback, ASAE's market research, and the success of our established Demo Day model, we see strong demand for this concept and believe it has real long-term value for the association community."

Sessions are free to attend. Find more information [here](#).

WEEKLY NEWS OF ASSOCIATIONS CVBs AND HOTELS

USAE

PUBLISHER & EXECUTIVE EDITOR 1982 – 2021
Anne Daly Heller

PUBLISHER-EMERITUS
Ross E. Heller
ross@usaenews.com

PUBLISHER
James Heller
james@usaenews.com

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER
Todd McElwee
todd@usaenews.com

MANAGING EDITOR
Jonathan Trager
jon@usaenews.com

HOTEL EDITOR
Jordan Bradley
jordan@usaenews.com

CREATIVE DIRECTOR
Diane Nichols
dkn@usaenews.com

GRAPHIC DESIGNER
Danielle Erbe

MARKETING & CIRCULATION DIRECTOR
Christy Pumphrey
christy@usaenews.com

To ensure publication, all Letters to the Editor must include a telephone number and mailing address in order to verify authenticity.
Complete copies of *USAE* are available for all paid subscribers online. Log onto <https://usaenews.com> and locate the log-in and password boxes. Specific log-in and password information is provided to subscribers via e-mail.
To receive another copy, please contact our circulation dept. at christy@usaenews.com.

USAE is published weekly except the week of Christmas Day by *USAE, Inc.* Subscription rate is \$80/year; add \$65 in Canada and Mexico. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *USAE*, PO Box 15009, Chevy Chase, MD 20825.

usaenews.com
USAE, Inc.
PO Box 15009, Chevy Chase, MD 20825
703.898.3528 • ©2026 by *USAE, Inc.*

EIC Opens Hall of Leaders and Global Awards Nominations

By Todd McElwee

The Events Industry Council (EIC) is welcoming nominations for the Hall of Leaders as well as its annual Global Awards. Hosted by MGM Resorts International, the Global Awards Gala is set for October 12 in Las Vegas.

"The Global Awards are one of the most meaningful moments in our year, offering an opportunity to recognize the people and organizations whose leadership continues to elevate our industry and expand its impact," said Amy Calvert, President & CEO, EIC. "At a time when the world is navigating increasing complexity, recognizing those who bring people together with purpose, integrity and vision has never been more important. These leaders remind us that business events are not only economic drivers, but powerful catalysts for connection, understanding and progress."

Now in its 41st year, the Hall of Leaders honors individuals whose careers have made a lasting and transformational impact on the global business events industry. More than 160 leaders have been inducted.

Last year's class included Robert A. Gilbert, CHME, CHBA (posthumous), Former President and CEO

of Hospitality Sales & Marketing Association International (HSMAI); Al Hutchinson, Founder, AVH Enterprise; Matthias Schultze, Managing Director, German Convention Bureau (GCB); Gary Shapiro, CEO and Vice Chair, Consumer Technology Association (CTA); and Claire Smith, CMP, VP Sales and Marketing, Vancouver Convention Centre

The Global Awards highlight excellence across several categories celebrating innovation, leadership and societal impact.

The Pacesetter Award recognizes emerging leaders with a proven track record of successful leadership that are making an impact in advancing the industry today.

EIC's Social Impact Award honors extraordinary effort on the part of an individual and or organization in the areas of people, planet, and prosperity that are aligned with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include diversity, equity and inclusion.

The Adaptation and Innovation Award showcases effort on the part of an individual or organization in its namesake categories to ensure the industry's relevance now and into the future.

"The Global Awards reflect the very best of our global community and the collective impact we can achieve when

we lead with purpose," said Calvert. "Recognizing excellence is not only about celebrating achievement—it is about inspiring continued innovation, elevating standards and reinforcing the vital role our industry plays in driving connection, collaboration and progress worldwide."

Carina Bauer is CEO of IMEX Group and a 2024 Hall of Leaders inductee. She is chairing the 2026 EIC Global Awards Task Force.

"It is an honor to help lead this effort and to ensure we recognize a diverse and inspiring group of individuals and organizations whose contributions are advancing the global business events community," said Bauer.

"Partnering with EIC to host this wonderful event each year is such an honor for MGM, and we look forward to welcoming EIC members, award recipients and others in October," said Stephanie Glanzer, Sr. Vice President & Chief Sales Officer of MGM Resorts. "We always relish the opportunity to work with EIC to not only drive the meetings and events industry forward but also recognize and celebrate the leaders who make the magic happen every day."

Table sales and registration for the EIC Global Awards Gala will open in May.

Find more information [here](#).

NEWS

Salt Lake Council Vetoes Rezoning for Proposed Hotel Project

By Jordan Bradley

The Salt Lake City Council unanimously voted against a rezoning proposal at an April 7 meeting that would have allowed a seven-story hotel project to be built near a beloved local park.

Developer Magnus Commercial Properties had sought to rezone a less-than-an-acre parcel of land next to the Sugar House Park to make way for a 145-room hotel. Zoning for the plot currently allows for a max height of 40 feet; Magnus wanted to increase that height to 90 feet.

Over the course of several public meetings, Magnus representatives sought to garner support for the project, which they had intended to be part of Hilton's Tapestry Collection. Plans for the boutique hotel project included a pool, ground-level shops, a 180-spot underground parking garage, and a restaurant.

However, in meetings leading up to the vote and prior to the vote on April

7, local community members voiced opposition to the rezoning request, arguing the increased height allowance would obstruct the neighborhood's skyline views and potentially open the door for similarly sized projects.

At the meeting, council member Sarah Young, who represents the district that encompasses the 110-acre Sugar House Park and the parcel in question, spoke against the rezoning proposal.

"Sugar House Park is one of our community's most valued public spaces. It's the landmark that many neighbors—including myself—use to tell people where we live, and it represents a shared identity and point of pride for the area," Young said, noting that the rezoning proposal saw a significant level of community engagement, which "shows just how deeply people care about its future."

Young echoed community concerns about the long-term impact of changing the zoning in the area, and noted the neighborhood had not yet seen

its community plan come to fruition.

"Expanding the business district outside what is outlined in our adopted community plan, particularly when our updated mixed-use zoning is still in its first year, feels premature," Young said. "We've not yet seen the full potential of development within the existing business core, and I believe we should allow that work to take shape before considering expansions of the business district that could have long-term implications for Sugar House."

John Potter, CEO of the Magnus Hotel Management, the developer's

management arm, told the *Salt Lake Tribune* the company was unsure of how it planned to proceed following the vote.

Without a change in its zoning designation, the parcel does not allow for hotel use, regardless of the height of the building.

"I'm not sure if any project is possible there, which is something we have shared with the city," Potter told the *Tribune*. "So while we're officially 'to be determined' on what we're going to do, our current plan is probably no project."

Hotel Owner Sued

continued from page 1

by housing individuals in a long-term capacity in a general commercial zone.

MTN Lodge officials argue the long-term nature of the lodging contract excludes them from hotel occupancy taxes and the contract will boost spending in the city.

Ridgway officials, however, believe the lodge's reading of municipal code is an attempt to dodge lodging and sales taxes associated with the long-term occupancy.

"Despite the vast sums of profit MTN Lodge seeks to gain from its multi-year agreement with Merrimac Ventures, MTN Lodge has expressed in writing that it refuses to pay any sales or lodging tax, or in the alternative, that the lodging and sales taxes do not apply to them," the lawsuit reads, according to reporting by the *Colorado Sun*.

For the owners of the MTN Lodge, an extended stay contract with the Four Seasons' developers, Merrimac Ventures, LLC, is an opportunity to financially support the lodge during a challenging time in the region's housing and tourism markets.

According to a letter dated November 8, 2025, from the lodge to town officials: "Ridgway Suites LLC has chosen to undertake the extended-stay lodging for the Four Seasons project primarily for financial reasons. Our hotel maintains solid occupancy in the summer (approximately 73%); however, during the winter months, occupancy typically drops to single digits until Memorial Day. Thus, our average annual occupancy is approximately 53%. Industry data shows that hotels operating at this occupancy level are generally not profitable and often struggle to remain open."

Ben Jackson, COO of Ridgway Suites, did not return a request for comment from *USAE* by press deadline. However, in an email to the *Colorado Sun*, Jackson said without

renting the rooms to Four Seasons subcontractors, the lodge will close due to low occupancy.

The Four Seasons Resort and Residences in Ridgway's neighboring Telluride broke ground last fall. When completed, the property will have 52 hotel rooms, 43 hotel residences, and 26 private apartments.

"We have been trying for months to come up with collaborative ideas that would allow extended stays and avoid a lawsuit," Jackson wrote to *The Sun*. "We've been rejected at every turn."

Kristin Kenney Williams, a spokesperson for the lodge, said embracing extended stay lodging in mountain towns such as Ridgway after "a horrible winter season in Colorado" is "a way to fill beds and have people still spending sales tax dollars and keeping these lodging properties open. It's a creative and innovative solution when we're seeing these really cyclical cycles."

Williams declined to say more on the matter due to ongoing litigation, and she referred *USAE* to a March 31 press release from the MTN Lodge regarding the lawsuit.

"The Town of Ridgway is asserting that long-term occupancy would require MTN Lodge to apply for a zoning change, which the Lodge ownership group disputes, saying renting a hotel room longer than 30 days is allowed under current Town code," the press release states. "The Town is also arguing that MTN Lodge is required to pay a combined 9.6% lodging and sales tax, also disputed by the ownership group."

The release continues: "Ridgway's municipal code does not prohibit hotels from offering longer stays, and it expressly distinguishes hotels from residential housing. The Town's own tax provisions also recognize that hotel guests may stay 30 days or more. Additionally, the Town code, which follows Colorado state code, specifically provides an exemption from lodging and sales tax for stays of 30 days or more."

CPR

continued from page 1

with the confidence and skills to act when it matters most. This moment reflects our shared commitment to build healthier, safer communities everywhere."

Participants will join the Nation of Lifesavers, a global movement launched by the American Heart Association in 2023 following the sudden cardiac arrest of Hamlin during Monday Night Football. Hamlin has used his experience to highlight the life-saving difference bystander CPR can make through his collaboration with the association to offer CPR training across the country. He serves as the National Ambassador for Nation of Lifesavers, including leading an annual class of NFL player ambassadors.

"As my experience with cardiac arrest has shown, CPR saves lives," said Hamlin. "Training in CPR during the NFL Draft Experience in my hometown of Pittsburgh is a full-circle moment for me, and I'm proud to see the NFL, the American Heart Association, and our community come together to build a life-saving legacy. It's about bringing people together around a powerful message: be ready, because you never know when it could be your time to save a life. I also hope it encourages young people to stay active and reminds families to prioritize health, wellness, and life-saving skills like CPR."

More than 90% of people who experience sudden cardiac arrest



without immediate CPR do not survive, according to the American Heart Association. Learning Hands-Only CPR takes as little as 90 seconds and requires no formal training, making large-scale moments like this one a powerful step to improving survival rates, organizers said.

Beyond the NFL Draft, the collaboration between the American Heart Association and the NFL continues year-round via grants, training, youth activities and expanded access to lifesaving equipment in communities.

"Through our partnership with the American Heart Association, the NFL is committed to building safer, stronger communities by giving people the knowledge and confidence to act in a medical emergency," said Anna Isaacson, NFL Sr. Vice President of Social Responsibility. "We're thrilled to stand alongside the American Heart Association and the Chasing M's Foundation as we equip thousands of people with the skills to make a lifesaving difference."

Find more information [here](#).

Industry Movers



Brian McKeon has been promoted to Executive Vice President of Public Policy & Regulatory Affairs at the National Confectioners Association (NCA). McKeon has led public policy efforts for five years, overseeing federal, state, and regulatory advocacy on behalf of the confectionery industry. NCA said as senior vice president, he's been instrumental in strengthening relationships with policymakers and overseeing and executing precision strategies that deliver high impact results.



Patrick Fisher has been appointed President of Hotel ZaZa, a collection of four distinctive luxury properties across Dallas, Houston, and Austin, which was acquired by Rockbridge Holdings. Fisher will lead the full Hotel ZaZa portfolio: Hotel ZaZa Dallas Uptown, Hotel ZaZa Houston Museum District, Hotel ZaZa Houston Memorial City and Hotel ZaZa Austin Downtown. Fisher joins Hotel ZaZa from the Ian Schrager Company, where he was COO.



Said Nuri is now Director of Food & Beverage at the Sanctuary Camelback Mountain Resort & Spa in Paradise Valley, Arizona. He brings experience leading resort operations. Most recently at Kalahari Resorts & Conventions, Nuri oversaw food and beverage operations across 24 outlets within a 975-room resort, leading a team of more than 800. His career includes roles at Hilton Fort Lauderdale Beach Resort and The Ritz-Carlton.



Kristen Hammac is the new General Manager of the Renaissance Chicago Downtown Hotel. Hammac has 27 years of experience. Most recently, she served as market vice president, overseeing Marriott Select Brand properties across six states. She was general manager of the Renaissance Orlando at SeaWorld and general manager of the Marriott Stanton South Beach. Hammac worked at the JW Marriott Washington D.C. and Renaissance Washington, D.C. Downtown.

[See More Industry Movers](#)

Brand USA Appoints Marion Certain as Trade Manager for Canada



Marion Certain

By [Todd McElwee](#)

Seeking to strengthen the connection with our neighbor to the north, Brand USA has appointed Marion Certain as Trade Manager for Canada.

Based in Toronto, Certain will lead efforts to strengthen relationships with Canadian travel advisors, tour operators, airlines, and key industry partners.

"I am thrilled to carry on Brand USA's presence in Canada, and I look forward to supporting and connecting with the travel industry across

all provinces and territories," she said. "I look forward to working with both English- and French-speaking partners and advisors in their initiatives toward the United States."

Originally from Normandy, France, Certain is bilingual in French and English and brings extensive international experience in the tourism industry. She has worked with Brand USA for more than three years, where she supported trade development efforts in the French market.

She previously worked with tour operator Worldia and held roles with organizations, including Atout France in Australia and New Zealand and Bonjour Québec in France.

"Marion brings a strong combination of industry expertise, global experience, and a deep understanding of the travel trade," said Jackie Ennis, Vice President, Global Trade Development. "Her leadership will be key as we continue to expand our partnerships and drive visitation from Canada to the United States."

Brand USA's annual travel trade event, Canada Connect, will take place October 26–29 across Toronto and Montreal, bringing together U.S. destinations and Canadian travel professionals.

Destinations International Releases Guide to Strengthen Community Engagement

By [Jonathan Trager](#)

Destinations International (DI) on April 7 unveiled The Destination Professional's Guide to Community Engagement, which aims to "help destination leaders strengthen relationships with residents and stakeholders while advancing long-term community alignment."

"The role of destination organizations continues to evolve, and community engagement is no longer optional," said Don Welsh, President & CEO of DI. "This guide provides a clear roadmap for helping destinations build stronger relationships, foster transparency and ensure tourism supports long-term community priorities."

Grounded in findings from the 2025 DestinationNEXT Futures Study and shaped by DI's Community Connection Professional Task Force, the guide translates global research into adaptable strategies that can be implemented across destinations of all sizes and geographies.

The guide outlines six core strategies for effective community engagement:

- Define community engagement within the organization and align internal teams
- Educate residents and officials on tourism's role in the local economy and quality of life

- Boost resident pride through storytelling and cultural celebration
- Address negative perceptions with transparency and dialogue.
- Integrate community service into tourism events and initiatives.

• Measure community engagement success using clear, meaningful metrics. "True community engagement requires listening, collaboration and accountability," said Jennifer Christie, CTA, Director of Marketing at Visit Loudoun and Co-Chair of the 2025 Community Connection Professional Task Force. "This guide provides a practical framework destination professionals can implement to strengthen local relationships and build long-term trust."

Tony Snell Rodriguez, Director of Community Engagement and Inclusion at Visit Milwaukee and Co-Chair of the Task Force, added: "Community engagement is ongoing work. With shared language, smart strategies and clear metrics, we can ensure tourism supports residents, local businesses, and broader community priorities."

The new guide builds on DI's commitment to research, education, and tools that support destination organizations in "addressing evolving community expectations and advancing sustainable tourism practices," according to the association.

Download the guide for free [here](#).

NEWS

MPI Shaking Up WEC Mainstage in San Antonio

By Todd McElwee

MPI's World Education Conference's (WEC) mainstage is taken on a new look this June in San Antonio.

A refreshed format—one MPI said is designed to make general sessions more dynamic, relevant and actionable for its community—will be introduced during the June 2–4 event. It will include an onstage Commentators Desk, which will feature conversation and interviews with executives, award winners and other participants.

“Every year, we evolve the World Education Conference (WEC) event to better reflect how our community learns, connects and leads, personally and professionally,” Jessie States, CMP, CMM, Vice President, MPI Consulting, MPI, told *USAE*. “The decision to introduce a Commentators Desk this year was both data- and community-driven.”

During each of the four general sessions speakers will join the commentators for a live, conversational discussion. States said the goal is to bridge inspiration and action—translating big ideas into real-world context, practical takeaways and peer-to-peer insight. Each Commentators Desk will be led by MPI's lead host/emcee and also include a planner, supplier, media member/industry voice. The last three commentators will change each session.

“Attendees want help making sense of what they just heard: What does this mean for me?” States said. “How does this show up in my work tomorrow? What are others in the industry experiencing right now? The commentators desk is designed to meet that need. We created a format that allows industry voices to bridge inspiration and application in real time—adding perspective, asking the questions people are

thinking and helping translate ideas into practical insight. Equally important, this format supports MPI's longstanding commitment to representing our community on every stage.”

She added the Commentators Desk will be a reflection of the diversity found within MPI's community.

Last year in St. Louis, MPI partnered with Zenus and Bishop-McCann/The Joy Index to analyze real-time audience engagement and emotional response during general sessions using tools such as facial sentiment analysis and (voluntary) biometric data. One takeaway was that engagement peaks when content feels contextual, shared and relational.

“Ultimately, we hope to make WEC San Antonio's general session pro-



gramming more dynamic, more human and more actionable—using data, design and dialogue to better serve the professionals who come together each year to move our industry forward,” she said.

Find more information on the WEC [here](#).

Springfield Voters Reject Hotel Tax Increase for Second Time

By Jonathan Trager

Voters in Springfield, Missouri, on April 7 rejected a proposed increase to the city's hotel license tax that would have helped fund a major expansion and renovation of the Springfield Expo Center, marking the second and likely final time the measure has failed at the ballot box.

Nearly 58% of voters opposed the proposal to hike the tax by 3%, failing by a wider margin than it did last November when nearly 53% of voters rejected a similar proposal, according to the Greene County Clerk's Office.

Countywide voter turnout was estimated at around 11%, lower than anticipated but higher than the approximately 7% voter turnout in the last election.

“We respect the decision of our voters and appreciate the time they took to learn about the proposal and make their voices heard,” said Springfield Mayor Jeff Schrag, who has supported the proposal.

Friends of SGF, one of the PACs that had engaged in a public awareness campaign to promote the tax increase, expressed disappointment with the result but said it was “grateful to the many community leaders, business leaders, labor organizations and public safety professionals who came together to support the convention center.”

“This campaign was built around

an opportunity to create jobs, attract investment, and strengthen our local economy,” the PAC stated following the vote. “We appreciate the voters who took the time to learn about the proposal and participate in the process. Springfield is a strong and growing community, and we remain committed to working together on opportunities that move our city forward.”

After the previous proposal was narrowly defeated in November, the city sought public feedback through a community survey and a series of “listening sessions” hosted by Springfield City Manager David Cameron. Consequently, the city added a sunset provision to the ballot language that would've expired the increase after 35 years.

“While the outcome was not in favor of the measure, the community engagement throughout this process has been meaningful and important,” said Cameron. “There was great value in listening and gathering information about what the residents think the city needs to be focused on. We intend to work on those things.”

In an interview with *USAE* prior to the election, Mark Hecquet, President & CEO of Visit Springfield, Missouri, said he'd be “pretty devastated” if the measure didn't pass again. A *USAE* request for comment after the vote wasn't returned before press deadline.

Neuroinclusion

continued from page 1

Celebration Month. ASAE said it provides one of the most comprehensive looks to date at how associations are embracing neuroinclusive practices in both workplace environments and meetings.

“As associations strive to better serve increasingly diverse communities, this landmark study offers critical insights into how neurodivergent individuals experience association engagement, and where meaningful progress can still be made,” ASAE said.

Summarized findings include:

- Association staff are less likely than members to report neurodivergent-specific accommodations exist—and more likely to believe none are in place—highlighting a disconnect in internal awareness and communication.
- While both members and staff generally trust executive leadership to support neuroinclusion, staff are less likely to view it as an active organizational priority.
- Members—particularly those who identify as neurodivergent—are more likely than staff to recognize neuroinclusive language and practices embedded in governance documents.
- Neurodivergent individuals report higher rates of discrimination, accessibility challenges, and exclusionary experiences, with inconsistent reporting of these issues to their associations.

“This study marks an important shift from awareness to action for our industry,” said Kevin Kirby, Executive Vice President, MPI Foundation. “At the MPI Foundation, we believe the

future of meetings and workplaces must be intentionally designed for all individuals to participate and thrive and neuroinclusion is a fundamental component of creating environments where innovation, connection, and belonging can truly flourish. Progress at this level doesn't happen in silos. It requires the association community to come together, share what's working, and take collective responsibility for building more inclusive experiences.

This research is an important step forward and a call for our industry to lead that change together.”

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of neuroinclusion across the association landscape, the study was conducted in four phases:

Phase 1: Preliminary Landscape Review

Literature review to establish baseline understanding.

Phase 2: In-depth Interviews (IDIs)
20 interviews with leaders and staff (9 neurodivergent, 11 neurotypical) to uncover barriers and opportunities.

Phase 3: Quantitative Survey
1,675 respondents (485 employees, 1,190 members), including neurodivergent participants, providing broad quantitative insights.

Phase 4: Online Journals
10 neurodivergent participants shared lived experiences to validate and deepen findings.

Choose Chicago, Discover Puerto Rico, MGM Resorts International, Visit Kansas City, and Myrtle Beach Convention Center supported the project.

Find more information and the full report [here](#).

USAExperiences

USAExperiences

continued from page 1

connected me with Scott Scheyli out of the Lucky Charm Riding Center—just a quick 15 minutes from my home. Scheyli has been training riders and horses for the better part of 35 years; most of that time, he's been working with Arabians.

When I arrive at Lucky Charm, it's mid-morning. The air is cool, but the sun is hot, and there is no breeze to disrupt the cloud of dust my car kicks up before I tentatively trundle down the center's driveway. I'm greeted by citrus trees, and a cluster of white stables adorned with the occasional hand-painted sign featuring firm instructions for this and that. The overall atmosphere of the center is lively, but also grounded.

I spot Scheyli on the far side of the property talking with two riders astride their steeds inside an elongated corral.

After Scheyli and I exchange pleasantries, he proceeds to break down the breadth of skills the highly adaptable Arabian horse is capable of, and he introduces me to three of his Arabians: Cleo, Xenon, and JT (this also happens to be the nickname of USAE's Managing Editor, Jon Trager).

As he speaks, Scheyli's training knowledge is so deep and specialized that it's easy to lose track of what, specifically, he's referring to when he talks about each skillset. But he's patient my ignorance and brings out the three horses in turn, and as our time moves on, it becomes clear just how adaptable and versatile this breed of horses is.

Scheyli brings out Cleo, a gentle and curious Arabian trained to show in the halter category, first. He hands

me a peppermint to give to her while he explains that Arabians have a stigma and are more widely regarded as temperamental and flighty throughout the horse world—a categorization that anyone who works with Scheyli's Arabians would be sure to reject.

But back to Cleo: the halter discipline is easy to identify in equestrian shows. Instead of being ridden, halter horses are led, and they pose in beautiful positions that highlight their striking features. Scheyli maneuvers Cleo into one such pose, and she stretches out her front legs, pulling her head up and perking her ears toward the sky. It's striking to see, and it's impressive how long she's able to hold a pose that's so counterintuitive to her natural form.

Xenon, Scheyli's horse trained in Arabian English saddle-riding, is a little riled up the day of my visit, Scheyli tells me. While many of the other Arabians in the stables approach their stall windows with curiosity and interest, Xenon does not. When we are first introduced, she has very little interest in me. Instead, she is preoccupied with a pair of friends who are out in another arena, Scheyli says.

And Scheyli has enough trust in Xenon and belief in the work he's put in with her to indulge me in a demonstration of her skills despite her being "naughty"—a term Scheyli uses with a good-natured and chuckle, and perhaps a little delight. As he brings her to the hitching post next to the tack room to be bridled and saddled, Scheyli talks to me about horse temperaments. Despite her appearance, Xenon is not actually misbehaving, he says; she's simply excited.

After an exercise in patience on the part of both Scheyli and Xenon (including a sassy little moment in which Xenon attempts to bounce Scheyli out of the saddle), horse and rider find an equilibrium, or perhaps an agreement. Once in the riding arena, the pair show off in the fanciful way only an Arabian (I'm learning) can. Xenon prances around the arena under Scheyli's direction, pulling her front legs high, her chin close to her chest in a lovely example of a very specific canter. Again, the horse's movements are unnatural, but also thoroughly graceful.

For Scheyli, his success over the years has relied on his own adaptability and perception of each individual horse. At present, he estimates his herd of horses is around 30. He tells me about his training philos-

ophy: he doesn't force a horse to do something it doesn't want to do, and he expects the riders he trains to work with the horse before even slipping a foot into a stirrup. That means they get dirty; brushing loose hair, picking hooves free of dirt, and, finally providing a post-ride shower.

From the time I arrived at Lucky Charm to the time I leave, I can feel a significant shift. Horses have long been seen as therapeutic animals, and it's something that O'Shea and Scheyli independently speak with me about. Scheyli shares stories of riders who have transformative experiences while working with him and his horses, and I can absolutely see why.

In fact, even before Scheyli turns his head a little to the side and asks if I want to do some riding, I feel more grounded and at ease than when I walked onto the property. But he does offer, and honestly, I'm itching to say yes.

So we bring out JT, whose temperament is the polar opposite of Xenon's. He is calm, grounded and gentle, and he puts me at ease immediately. JT is trained in the Western riding discipline of reining, which means he's been trained to do a load of wild and precise things at high speeds, such as sliding to a stop or spinning in circles.

After strapping JT into his halter (and, of course, having me sign the appropriate liability paperwork), Scheyli hands me the lead and walks me through every step of preparing a horse to be ridden. I brush JT's spring coat, check for burrs, and pick out clumps of dirt from his hooves before Scheyli and I equip him with saddle blanket, then saddle, and walk him to the riding arena.

It has been at least a decade since I've been on a horse, and I am thrilled to strap on the black velvet helmet Scheyli hands me and get my feet in



the stirrups. We review the basics: heels down, reins in the left hand, mindful of your seat, forward, backward, canter. JT is steady despite my excitement—so steady, in fact, that Scheyli adds some spurs to my boots in the middle of the ride so we can continue our lesson.

And then, Scheyli instructs me on how to guide JT into a controlled spin. The move is involved, and I am unskilled, but JT and Scheyli are not.

Scheyli is precise and exacting in his assessments of my form, as the trio of us attempt to bring JT and me into the spin—but he's also inviting and patient, clear in his instructions. Before I know it, JT and I have completed a set of skillful (on JT's part) twirls. I'm not winning any medals any time soon, but I am absolutely elated about the experience.

Spending the time with Cleo, Xenon, JT and Scheyli is as true a testament to the impact of a Meet-a-Horse experience. I walked away from my time with Scheyli feeling more grounded and less burdened than when I first met the crew. And to be completely transparent, I hope that O'Shea's endeavor to bring a trend of Meet-a-Horse events to the meetings and events world is successful.



Stay Connected



@USAEnews

Rising Stars

Spotlight on Industry Rising Star Micaela Nardino

By Jonathan Trager

Despite standing 5'11—yet still being the shortest person in her family—Micaela Nardino says she's been told she has “short girl energy,” which she channels into her work as a Special Projects Manager for Tourism Economics.

Having just been named a 2026 Rising Industry Professionals honoree by Destinations International, Nardino traces the start of her journey to the industry back to when she was 15 years old working at a Chinese Jazz restaurant (yes, you read that correctly) owned by her uncle. There, she gained customer-service experience that would benefit her in her career.

“I was a hostess there and it was so hard because you're speaking into the phone while a band is playing,” she told *USAE*.

After enrolling at NC State University in Raleigh, North Carolina,

Nardino began her studies majoring in Environmental Science before shifting to Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management. She also became an ambassador from the College of Natural Resources to students, alumni, and professors.

“It was the best experience,” Nardino said. “I still talk to my friends from that program. I met so many awesome professors through that.”

A credited internship in North Carolina's Outer Banks during her junior year opened another door for Nardino: The company sponsoring the internship also had a fund that supported destination research at NC State and other North Carolina schools.

Under the supervision of Whitney Knollenberg, a professor at NC State, Nardino embarked on a project focused on sustainable tourism housing. Destination organizations such as those in Moab, Utah, and Gulf Shores, Alabama, were working with local governments and contractors

to create affordable housing campuses for workers in the tourism sector.

The pair ultimately presented their research at the Visit NC Tourism Conference in Asheville.

“The point is, when you visit these destinations, you're not going to enjoy it unless these people who can't afford to work there are able to work there,” Nardino explained.

In 2023, Nardino applied for and received the Joan and John Markham Award offered by the Travel and Tourism Research Association. NC State flew Nardino out to Houston to attend the association's Marketing Outlook Forum.

“I was there all alone because the professors couldn't make it,” said



Micaela Nardino

USAE,
the only weekly
community
newspaper of
associations, CVBs
and hotels.

Subscribe today.



usaenews.com

Nardino. “I got to be a part of all of it and speak on my award and how excited I was to be in the industry.”

It was at this fateful event that Nardino met a contingent from Tourism Economics that included current Executive Vice President Erik Evjen and President Adam Sacks. Good conversations led to a dinner invitation, which led to a full-time job after graduation.

Nardino started with Tourism Economics as a project coordinator on a team of 11 people with Symphony, the data platform arm of Tourism Economics. Nearly three years later, the team has grown to 55. Nardino has worked in conjunction with data engineers and former destination organization marketers.

“I do a lot of translating data processing language into tourism language,” she said. “We work mostly with U.S. clients, and they're so different but they face the same challenges. They're connected in some way even though they market themselves very differently.”

With all of the advisory boards and committees that Destinations International has to offer, Nardino hopes being a Rising Industry Professionals honoree helps afford her the opportunity to step into one of those roles.

“I want to be more involved in tourism and help more destinations advocate for themselves,” she said. “This is an industry I want to work in for the rest of my life, and this is exactly the cohort I needed to be in to meet more people who have the same love for this industry.”

NEWS

Destinations International Announces 2026 Pathways to Success Scholarship Recipients

By Jonathan Trager

Destinations International (DI) on April 8 announced the 2026 recipients of its Pathways to Success Scholarship & Professional Development Program, an initiative supported by the DI Foundation designed to “increase access, opportunity, and career pathways for students pursuing degrees in hospitality and tourism management.”

Pathways to Success broadens its reach to support students at all accredited colleges and universities across the United States and Canada. Each selected student receives up to \$8,000 in tuition support, access to year-long mentorship, professional development and industry engagement opportunities, and participation at DI’s Annual Convention.

The Pathways to Success program “provides students with critical visibility into the destination sector, often underrepresented in academic settings, while fostering local connections that can lead to internships, mentorship and long-term career opportunities within their own communities,” according to DI.

“Investing in the next generation of destination leaders is essential to the long-term strength and sustainability of our industry,” said Don Welsh, President & CEO of DI. “Through the Pathways to Success program, we are not only reducing financial barriers but creating meaningful connections and learning experiences that prepare these exceptional students for careers in tourism and hospitality. By providing direct exposure to the destination

sector, we are helping students better understand the breadth of opportunities within their own communities and building pathways to meaningful, place-based careers.”

The 2026 Pathways to Success Scholars include the following:

- Christell Miranda Lopez, University of the District of Columbia
- Elise Tyson, Morgan State University
- Gabrielle Nembhard, Delaware State University
- Kristelle Soto, University of Central Florida
- Pasindu Perera, South Dakota State University
- Samya Drakeford, Delaware State University
- Semiyah Smith, University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff

- Wut Yee Kyi Pyar, University of Waterloo

Applicants to the Pathways to Success program will be selected based on academic achievement, demonstrated financial need, and strong commitment to leadership and service.

“The Destinations International Foundation is proud to support programs that expand access and create meaningful career pathways for emerging professionals,” said Foundation Chair Martha J. Sheridan, president & CEO of Meet Boston. “By investing in these students, we are helping to build a stronger, more future-ready workforce for our industry.”

Find information about the program [here](#).

Around Associations

IGLTA Welcoming Global Convention Proposals... The International LGBTQ+ Travel Association (IGLTA) is now accepting session proposals for its 2026 Global Convention, taking place in Seville, Spain from November 17 - 21. Centered on the themes of Identity, Culture, and Community, IGLTA said it is looking for a diverse range of voices with innovative insights and strategies for shaping LGBTQ+ travel.

Key areas of interest include AI, equity & intersectionality and inclusive marketing.

“The IGLTA Global Convention is

built on the belief that our industry is at its strongest when we share ideas and learn from one another,” said Meg Ten Eyck, IGLTA Board Chair and CEO of EveryQueer. “We want to hear from the innovators and disruptors across our global network who are working every day to tackle industry challenges and create inclusive travel spaces for our community.”

May 25 is the submission deadline. The IGLTA Convention Committee will review all proposals and announce selected speakers in July.

Find more information [here](#).

PCMA Southwest & Pacific Chapter Hosting The Business, The Balance & The Brews... Looking at business, finances and work/life balance, the PCMA Southwest & Pacific Chapter is hosting The Business, The Balance & The Brews on May 5 at SEAS Productions in Oceanside, California. The event will include Cinco de Mayo celebration.

Find more information [here](#).

NRAEF’s National ProStart Invitational Coming to Baltimore... On April 24–26, the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation’s

(NRAEF) National ProStart Invitational (NPSI) will be at the Marriott Baltimore Waterfront.

“NPSI is the country’s premier secondary school competition focused on restaurant management and culinary arts,” organizers said. “Annually, more than 400 student competitors put their skills to the test in front of industry leaders, NRAEF Trustees, state restaurant associations, and family and friends – all with hopes of earning coveted scholarships from the nation’s best culinary and restaurant management programs.”

Find more information [here](#).

Virginia Guesthouse Hotel & Conference Center Opens

Situated on University of Virginia Campus

By Jordan Bradley

The Virginia Guesthouse Hotel and Conference Center on the grounds of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville opened to guests on April 6.

The 214-room hotel was established with the meetings and events needs of the university in mind.

The hotel offers access to more than 25,000 square feet of meeting and event space, “and a direct connection to the university’s heritage” through both the hotel’s location and an integrated UVA Welcome Center on site, the Guesthouse said.

“Virginia Guesthouse was imagined as a gathering space to foster community and support all aspects of the university,” said Greg Hilker, General Manager of the Virginia Guesthouse. “We’re thrilled to open our

doors and welcome our neighbors and UVA family for the first time, and we look forward to becoming a meaningful part of daily life in Charlottesville.”

The Guesthouse can accommodate up to 1,000 attendees in its meeting and event spaces; and boasts on-site catering; the Poplar, a full-service restaurant with indoor and outdoor terrace dining; The Perch, a rooftop bar and café; and a grab-and-go eatery.

“The Virginia Guesthouse Hotel & Conference Center was intentionally designed to meet the evolving needs of today’s meeting and event planners,” said Rich Keurajian, Director of Sales and Marketing at the Virginia Guesthouse. He added: “Being located on the Grounds of the University of Virginia brings a unique sense of purpose and intellectual energy that planners and attendees will immediately feel.



The Virginia Guesthouse, located on the Ground of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, opened on April 6.

Set alongside the Blue Ridge Mountains and Virginia’s renowned wine country, Virginia Guesthouse offers

an environment that leaves a lasting impression on every guest.”

Find more information [here](#).

ST. LOUIS



**WE
DON'T MIND
CHANGING
MINDS**

MEET STL



explore **st. louis**