

IMEX Frankfurt Enjoys Record- Breaking Success

By Todd McElwee

Organizers confirmed the 2026 edition of IMEX Frankfurt was a record-setting edition.

Featuring its biggest show floor yet, IMEX Frankfurt had close to 3,000 exhibiting companies, more than 13,000 participants, 4,500 hosted buyers and 73,000 pre-scheduled meetings. More than 63,000 one of one meetings took place during the show.

“Beyond the numbers, the human element and energy of this community remain at the heart of IMEX,” Carina Bauer, CEO of IMEX, said at the event’s press conference. “Although AI was a hot topic, the counterpoint is that face-to-face meetings are having a renaissance. More than ever their value lies in trusted, real-life conversations with real people who spark off each other, leading to multiple positive outcomes—not least business, friendship, employment and industry innovation.”

On May 19, the IMEX Place Leaders Forum was held at the Marriott Frankfurt Hotel. It called on CVBs, civic leaders and venues to reposition business events as a strategic tool for placemaking and economic growth—not just tourism.

The Forum, formerly known as
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IMEX Chairman Ray Bloom and CEO Carina Bauer last week at IMEX Frankfurt.

Choice Hotels Patrick Pacious CEO to Step Down

By Jordan Bradley

Choice Hotels International announced on May 20 that longtime President & CEO Patrick Pacious is stepping down from the leadership role he has held since 2017.

Choice’s board of directors appointed Dominic Dragisich, the company’s Chief Growth and Strategy Officer, as its interim CEO while the company conducts a “comprehensive search” for a permanent replacement.

Neither Choice nor Pacious disclosed a reason for their parting of ways, and Choice did not return *USAE* request for comment by deadline.

Pacious has been with Choice for more than 20 years. In order to aid with the leadership transition, Pacious will act in an advisory capacity through August 31, Choice said.

“Leading Choice Hotels has been the greatest privilege of my career,” said Pacious.

During his tenure as president and CEO, Pacious led Choice in an expansion from 11 brands to 22, growing in the upscale and extend-stay segments through the acquisition of Wood-Spring Suites and Radisson Hotels Americas.

“Pat’s leadership has helped define a new era for Choice Hotels. Through
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DI and IGLTA Launch LGBTQ+ Tourism Toolkit

By Jonathan Trager

Destinations International (DI) and the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association (IGLTA) have introduced a new tourism toolkit aimed at helping destinations better serve LGBTQ+ travelers through a stronger focus on safety, belonging, and community engagement.

The organizations announced the initiative on May 20, saying the resource is designed to give destination organizations research-backed guidance

on how to create more inclusive visitor experiences.

The toolkit was developed with support from the DI Foundation and in collaboration with the IGLTA Foundation. It draws on research from Valuegraphics, a global audience research firm, based on responses from more than 1,800 LGBTQ+ travelers in major international markets considering trips to the United States.

According to the findings, LGBTQ+ travelers are strongly influenced by destinations where they feel

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NYC Hotel Union & Hotels Reach Tentative Agreement Housekeepers to Earn More Than \$100,000

By Jordan Bradley

A hotel worker union and hotel trade association in New York City came to an industry-wide contract agreement that will pay housekeepers more than \$100,000 annually.

The Hotel and Gaming Trades Council (HTC) announced on May 18 that it and the Hotel Association of New York City (HANYC) had reached a tentative agreement on a new Industry-Wide Agreement

(IWA) ahead of a summer budding with international and national travel.

The new eight-year contract, which goes into effect on July 1, is “the best contract in the history of our union,” HTC said, with the highest raises “in our union’s contract history—by far.” By the contract’s end, “room attendants and other non-tipped workers will be earning six figures,” the union said, which is an almost 50% increase.

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NEWS

Louisiana Casino Resort Hotel Tower Celebrates Grand Opening

Staff Plugs Water Leak, Guests None the Wiser

By Jordan Bradley

The Coshatta Casino Resort in Kinder, Louisiana, celebrated the grand opening of its new 204-room Legacy Tower with a ribbon-cutting ceremony on May 15.

Guests arrived on May 18 for stays in the Legacy Tower, which brings the resort's total inventory of guest rooms to more than 1,000.

From the guest perspective, everything went as planned in the beautiful new tower. Just days ahead of the opening, however, a water leak originating in a fourth floor guest room left rooms on several floors water damaged and required quick action from the staff on site.

Aaron Lepinski, Director of Hospitality for Coshatta Casino Resort, has been with the property for approximately 15 years and in hospitality for 30, he told *USAE*. During his time at Coshatta, the property has renovated and expanded, and even weathered Hurricanes Laura and Delta in 2020—both caused significant damage to the region and the resort itself.

So when staff members noticed flooding in the new tower the week prior to its debut, the Coshatta team was ready and prepared to respond.

"There were plenty of [staff] around, including myself, that had witnessed the initial signs of there being an issue," Lepinski said. "The team responded quickly. We located and isolated the issue. We stopped any more water from collecting, and then we took action—which is extracting, remediating, mitigating and removing. Within a 24-hour period, we had any-

thing that was wet either removed or well on its way to being dried."

According to Lepinski, by the time guests arrived, everything was handled, and all guest stays were able to be accommodated.

"We didn't have to change anything. There was very little impact, if any," Lepinski said. "Part of being an operator is exactly that: being able to pivot and adjust to the unexpected, the unforeseen and the unplanned. The longer you're in this industry, those experiences are going to happen. You hope that they don't happen frequently, but they happen, and you learn from each of those experiences on how to come out on the best end possible."

He added: "We did not have to displace a single guest because of the incident. So from the guest perspective, there was no incident. And that's really what we shoot for when there's any sort of an incident that percolates or bubbles up behind the scenes."

The Coshatta Casino Resort is no small property, and the staff is well-versed in responding to unexpected incidents. The campus consists of three hotels: the Grand Hotel, the Seven Clans Hotel and now the Legacy Tower. Alongside the Coshatta's gaming and lodging offerings, the property consists of more than 50,000 square feet of meeting and event space divided between a



David Sickey (center), Chairman of the Coshatta Tribe of Louisiana, cuts the ribbon during the grand opening ceremony for Legacy Tower at Coshatta Casino Resort in Kinder, Louisiana, on May 15.

25,000-square-foot concert hall and 20,000 square feet of flexible meeting and event spaces; a resort pool and lazy river; a golf course; a kids play environment; pickleball, volleyball and basketball courts; a fully-stocked lake for fishing; a dog park; and eight food and beverage outlets.

Because of the resort's previous experiences with hurricanes—by comparison the leak "was nothing," Lepinski said—and due to the size and breadth of function of its campus, Lepinski told *USAE* that staff are ready and capable of responding to a wide variety of situations.

"We have the equipment on hand, and the team really responded quickly," Lepinski said of the May 12 leak. "Most of my team has been through similar issues and knows what they need to do at the moment without needing somebody there instructing

every move that they do. What could have been a pretty severe incident really turned out to be minimal and cause very little to no impact on our grand opening."

For Lepinski, the leak didn't dampen his spirits about the Legacy Tower's debut, which included a new centralized entry point for guests that he describes as "amazing."

"It is one of the finest arrival points or lobbies that I've ever seen in my career," Lepinski said. "Not just what's in the state of Louisiana, but from other resorts of equivalent size—not just from coast to coast, but from around the world. I've been fortunate to visit casinos in Malaysia, in Bahamas and Australia, and our arrival experience competes with some of the most premier lobbies and arrival experiences as far as the grandness of it and the impressiveness of the space itself."

According to Lepinski, by the time guests arrived, everything was handled, and all guest stays were able to be accommodated.

Choice Hotels

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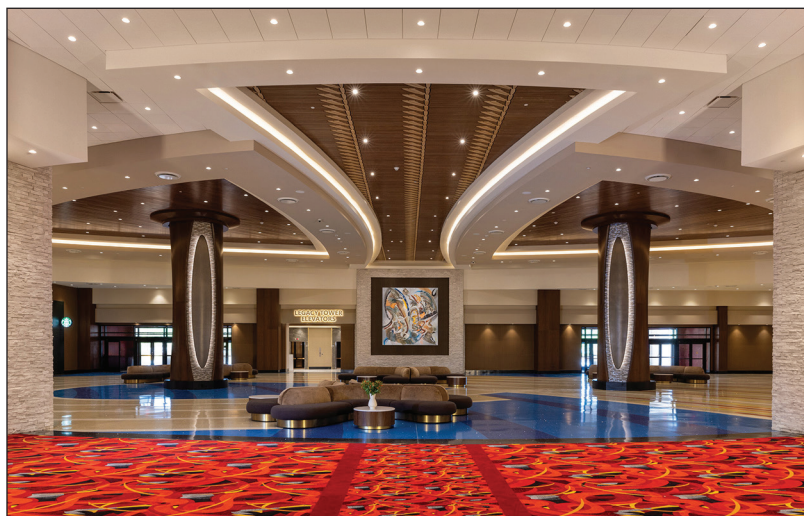
strategic acquisitions, disciplined portfolio growth, international expansion, and a relentless focus on franchisee success, Choice has become a more resilient and diversified company," said Stewart W. Bainum, Jr., Chairman of the Board for Choice Hotels.

However, Pacious also led the failed hostile takeover attempt of Wyndham Hotels & Resorts in 2023. The company made an offer to acquire Wyndham for \$7.8 billion, which was publicly shot down by Wyndham. In response, Choice revised the offer and launched a hostile bid for Wyndham. After Wyndham's board and shareholders repeatedly rejected Choice's attempts, Choice abandoned the effort after five months of back and forth.

In the May 20 statement, Pacious said during his tenure Choice "laid the foundation for a customer-centric, AI-enabled business, in alignment with our long-term strategic plan" and that "now is the right time for a new leader to guide Choice Hotels into its next phase of growth."

Prior to his role as chief growth and strategy officer, Dragisich served as Choice's executive vice president of operations and chief global brand officer after acting as the company's chief financial officer from 2017–2023.

"I am honored to step into the role of Interim CEO and look forward to building on the Company's strong foundation. We remain focused on delivering long-term value for our franchisees and shareholders and creating great experiences for our guests and associates," said Dragisich.



The new lobby at the Coshatta Casino Resort's Legacy Tower took design inspiration from the culture and heritage of the Coshatta Tribe of Louisiana.

HOTS

HOTS Hot Dog Defender... An Indiana man—the reigning champion and 17-winner of Nathan’s Famous International Hot Dog Eating Contest—has been granted permission to leave the state to defend his title after he pleaded guilty to misdemeanor battery charge for slapping a man at a bar, the Associated Press reports. Joey “Jaws” Chestnut is set to defend his title on July 4 while on probation, according to his lawyer, Mario Massillamany. Chestnut entered a guilty plea on April 20 and was sentenced to 180 days of probation in Hamilton County, Indiana. Massillamany claims the incident “was just a misunderstanding. Joey understood that he

wanted to accept responsibility for his actions, and he did.” According to Richard Shea, the co-founder and president of Major League Eating, the organization that oversees the Nathan’s hot dog eating contest, the incident did not disqualify Chestnut from competing this year. Last year at the same competition, Chestnut ate 70½ hot dogs and buns in 10 minutes, AP reports, and earlier this year, he won the 2026 Ultimate Bologna Showdown in Tennessee. He ate 16 pounds of sausage in 8 minutes.

HOTS can’t help but wonder: What does Chestnut do for indigestion?

* * * * *

HOTS Holy Guacamole... The 13th annual Avocado Festival in Tancítaro, Mexico, earned a Guinness World Record for a truly out-of-this-world serving of guacamole. As part of the festival, organizers endeavored to whip up the largest bowl of guacamole on record—and they were successful. The record attempt was organized by the Local Plant Health Board of Tancítaro, UPI reports. The

guacamole took two and a half hours to make and weighed a whopping 14,991 pounds, beating the previous record of 10,961 pounds. “This moment belongs to the thousands of Michoacán families whose livelihoods are rooted on avocado farms,” said Raul E. Martínez Pulido, President of the Association of Avocado Exporting Producers and Packers of Mexico. HOTS would bet there was an unofficial record achieved for most tortilla chips and other dippers eaten at the same festival.

EIC Research Finds Business Generated \$1.3T in Direct Spending

By Todd McElwee

The Events Industry Council (EIC), in collaboration with Oxford Economics, found in 2025 that business events brought together 1.65 billion participants globally and generated \$1.3 trillion in direct spending, representing a 12.2% increase over 2019 levels.

The findings are part of the 2026 “Global Economic Significance of Business Events Study Executive Summary.” EIC said the study, sponsored by PCMA and MPI, provides a complete view of the scale, scope and impact of business events, measuring activity across more than 180 countries.

“Business events are essential infrastructure for a connected, innovative and resilient global economy,” said Amy Calvert, President & CEO,

EIC. “This study gives our industry credible, current data to demonstrate what we have long known: when people gather with purpose, they create economic value, strengthen communities, accelerate knowledge exchange and build the trust required to move ideas into action.”

Combining direct, indirect and induced impacts, the sector supported \$3.1 trillion in total business sales, \$1.8 trillion in total GDP and 24.2 million jobs worldwide.

“This research is an important advocacy tool for every sector of our industry,” said Stephanie Harris, EIC Chair and President, The Incentive Research Foundation. “It helps destinations, venues, organizers, suppliers, associations and corporate leaders tell a stronger, more unified story

about the role business events play in job creation, workforce development, innovation and long-term economic growth. The data reinforces that our sector is not discretionary—it is a driver of progress.”

Researchers defined business events as gatherings of 10 or more participants for a minimum of four hours in a contracted venue, excluding social, formal educational and recreational activities. The research process included a global survey of more than 1,600 event organizers, venues, destination marketing organizations, suppliers and other participants, as well as analysis of country-level studies, third-party industry data, EIC Global Business Events Barometer data and Oxford Economics’ global economic

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Columbus Zoo Seeks Developer for Onsite Hotel

By Jordan Bradley

The Columbus Zoo in Ohio would like to welcome future guests to take a walk on the wild side with the potential addition of a hotel on site.

The zoo is currently vetting developer proposals to add an upscale hotel to the property with at least 130 guest rooms that the zoo envisions will be “a destination experience, not simply an accommodation—hospitality, conservation, and immersive design,” according to the request for qualifications document obtained by USAE.

The Columbus Zoo hopes adding a hotel to the attraction will “elevate the visitor and animal experience,” and increase attendance and the length of guest stays at the zoo, the document said.

The deadline for developers to submit proposals was May 22, and zoo officials are now reviewing

submissions.

The hotel should be comprised of: a mix of room layouts, including king rooms, “family-oriented rooms with bunk beds and themed elements,” double-queen rooms, and suites; a full-service restaurant designed to service hotel guests, zoo patrons and locals, and a café or grab-and-go concept; an indoor pool with a waterslide; a fitness center; a 24-hour market or retail outlet; and a themed lobby “with integrated conservation and educational programming,” according to the zoo’s request.

The attraction is also asking developers to include around 7,750 square feet of meeting space in their plans, and to ensure the hotel is integrated into the zoo with a dedicated pedestrian entrance.

The zoo estimates the hotel would cost between \$35 million and \$45 million to develop, excluding the cost of land. The attraction is willing to lease

the site and is open to alternative ownership and operating models, the request states.

The Columbus Zoo is in the process of a broader expansion project, called the 2040 Vision Framework, of which the hotel is a pivotal part.

Currently, the zoo is part of a larger, multi-attraction campus that includes the Zoombezi Bay, a water park featuring 19 attractions, and the Safari Golf Club. In the 2040 Framework master plan, the zoo is also interested in establishing a conservation center and a 100,000-square-foot stand-alone aquarium, according to the zoo’s developer proposal request.

A spokesperson for the Columbus Zoo told the *Columbus Dispatch* that once a developer is selected, planning and design of the hotel could take roughly 12–18 months and construction could take another 18–24 months.

NEWS

PCMA Creates Global Awards for Sustainable Business Events

By Todd McElwee

PCMA has unveiled the Convene 4 Climate (C4C) Global Awards, a worldwide competition designed to recognize and elevate practical solutions to push sustainable transformation across the business events industry.

Sherrif Karamat, CAE, President & CEO, PCMA and CEMA, made the announcement during the 4th Global Forum of National Convention Bureaux just before IMEX Frankfurt.

“The C4C Global Awards are about more than recognition—they are about elevating solutions that are critical to reshaping and protecting the future of the global business events industry,” said Karamat. “We are calling on changemakers who are moving beyond promises to bold, practical approaches that can be scaled, replicated, and embedded across business events worldwide to deliver real, measurable impact.”

PCMA said the C4C Global Awards create a platform for leadership, collaboration, and legacy—spotlighting those setting new benchmarks and

turning business events into a powerful driver of sustainable change. The awards celebrate innovators, organizations, and leaders who are redefining how events are designed, delivered, and experienced to create lasting social and environmental impact.

Award categories include:

- The **Human Impact Award** honors organizations that have redesigned the human element of events through neuro-inclusive design, behavioral innovation, or community-centered hosting models.

- The **Technology for Climate Award** recognizes the intentional integration of technology to decarbonize the event lifecycle via AI-driven tools, carbon-negative materials, innovative energy use, and more.

- The **Trailblazer Award** celebrates an individual who has used their platform to transform the business events industry through policy, mentorship, or working toward net-zero goals.

- The **Impact Event Award** highlights events that set the benchmark for sustainable business practices with a focus on people, planet, and profit.

The submission process is complimentary and will remain open through June 30. Finalists will be invited to attend Convene 4 Climate in Lisbon, Portugal, on September 16, where

they will participate in a live pitch competition. Winners will present their solutions at Convening Leaders 2027 in Miami.

Find more information [here](#).

LGBTQ+ Toolkit

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accepted, safe, and able to “be themselves.” Researchers identified three primary values driving travel decisions within the community: harmony, health and well-being, and balance.

Don Welsh, President & CEO of DI, said the initiative reflects the growing role of destination organizations as community leaders.

“As destination organizations continue evolving their role as community leaders and stewards of place, creating environments where all travelers feel genuinely welcomed and represented is essential,” Welsh said.

The toolkit provides recommendations for engaging LGBTQ+ travelers throughout the tourism experience, including marketing, trip planning, and in-destination services. Organizers said destinations that align with

travelers’ values see stronger visitor loyalty, higher engagement, and increased spending.

Meg Ten Eyck, Chair of IGLTA and CEO of EveryQueer, said LGBTQ+ travelers are increasingly seeking destinations where they feel visible and secure.

“This collaboration gives destinations the tools to better understand our values and create more meaningful experiences that support our safety, celebrate our visibility and benefit local communities,” Ten Eyck said.

The launch comes as the global tourism industry places greater emphasis on inclusivity and traveler safety. Industry research has shown that many LGBTQ+ travelers continue to face discrimination while traveling and often prioritize destinations with strong reputations for acceptance and inclusion.

Find the LGBTQ+ tourism toolkit [here](#).

IMEX

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the Policy Forum, was redeveloped for this year and drew its strongest attendance to date. More than 130 participants representing north of 60 destinations and venues alongside policymakers from Angola, São Paulo, Reykjavik, Israel, Mexico and Mozambique were present.

Jane Cunningham, Director of European Engagement, Destinations International, moderated the Forum alongside facilitator Professor Greg Clark. He urged a move away from siloed thinking, explaining the lines between tourism, investment and education are blurring and that a whole-of-place strategy, not separate sector approaches, is necessary.

In addition, the IMEX Frankfurt Gala Dinner Awards was held at the Sheraton Frankfurt Airport Hotel on May 20.

Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE, AAiP, President & CEO, ASAE, presented the Global Association Visionary Award to Virginie De Visscher, Executive Director Business Events of Destination Canada Business Events.

Destinations International’s Global Ambassador Award was given by its President & CEO Don Welsh to Peter Lee, Executive Director of Goyang International Expo Foundation.

IAEE’s International Excellence Award was given to audiovisual

association AVIXA for its event, InfoComm América Latina, by Marsha Flanagan, CEM, President & CEO, IAEE.

Mohamed Sherif, Group Operation Director, ICOM Group, Egypt, won IAPCO’s Driving Excellence—Innovation Award. The award was given by IAPCO President Sissi Lignou.

Ben Hainsworth, Executive Director of EASL, the European Association for the Study of the Liver, was the recipient of the ICCA Global Influencer Award, presented by ICCA President Marta Gomes.

JMIC’s President, James Rees, presided over the JMJC Unity Award which was given to Anne-Marie Baezner, CEO of Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Venues.

Sofiya Soushkevitch from Vistula University in Poland received the MPI Foundation Student Scholarship Award. The award was presented by Kevin Kirby, Executive Director of the MPI Foundation, and is part of the IMEX-MPI-MCI Future Leaders Forum International University Challenge.

The CityDNA Sum-

mer School Award, a special one-off honor, was bestowed. Barbara Jamison-Woods, President of City Destinations Alliance, presented the award to Dennis Speet, Director, Amsterdam Convention Bureau; and Pier Paolo Mariotti, Meeting Manager, Eurac Research.

SITE CEO Annette Gregg handed over the Jane E. Schuldt Master Motivator Award to Daryl Keywood, CEO of Walthers DMC.

The IMEX-EIC Innovation in Sustainability Award was presented by EIC’s President and CEO, Amy Calvert to BEFuture.

Paul Flackett Academy Awards are named in honor of the former IMEX managing director. Four individuals were celebrated for their dedication to the industry and for driving innovation: Ben Goedegebuure, former Chief Global Strategy Officer at Maritz and now Principal of BG Global Perspectives; Claire Smith, Executive Director at Convention Centres of Canada; Welsh; and Sigrid Smuda-Fröschl, Marketing Manager Conventions, Munich Convention Bureau.

IMEX America will be held October 13–15 in Las Vegas.



On May 19, the IMEX Place Leaders Forum was held at the Marriott Frankfurt Hotel. Photo credit: IMEX

Industry Movers



Meredith Dickinson has joined Visit Atlantic City as National Account Director. A South Jersey local, Dickinson offers a regional perspective and passion for Atlantic City. She arrives at the CVB with a background in hospitality, business and client engagement. Dickinson spent three years at Renault Winery and Resort as the business development director. This move comes as Patrick McCormick, the longtime national account director, retires this summer.



Tim Pawlenty, the 39th Governor of Minnesota, has been appointed President & CEO of the Solar Energy Industries Association (SEIA). He served two terms from 2003–2011. He oversaw a \$50 billion biennial budget, led more than 20 state agencies and departments, and championed some of the nation’s most forward-looking renewable energy initiatives. He also previously served as President & CEO of the Financial Services Roundtable.



Rachael Riggs is now Visit Seattle’s Vice President of Meetings and Conventions. Riggs brings more than 30 years of experience. She served as Maritz’s general manager of environmental strategy. Prior to her time with Maritz, she held various sales roles at Destination Vancouver, NYC Tourism & Conventions, Visit San Diego, and Visit Baltimore. She has won the Event Industry Council President’s Award and PCMA’s Supplier of the Year.



Daniel Castro is now President of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation (ITIF), succeeding Robert D. Atkinson, who founded ITIF in 2006. Since joining in 2007, Castro has shaped ITIF’s voice on technology and innovation policy. He previously served as vice president and director of ITIF’s Center for Data Innovation. He was recently named by Washingtonian magazine as one of the “500 Most Influential People Shaping Policy.”

[See More Industry Movers](#)

MPI Sets Full Social Slate for WEC

By [Todd McElwee](#)

The “E” in MPI’s WEC of course stands for “education,” but it just as easily could represent “entertainment” or “enjoyment.” Complementing a substantial educational slate, the conference will feature a full social menu during its June 2–4 run in San Antonio.

Revelry: The Confluence of Culturas kicks off the festivities on June 2. The opening celebration will span the Henry B. González Convention Center’s Grotto, the LDR, and Merida Plaza along the banks of the historic San Antonio River Walk.

“Experience puro Texas at Revelry: The Confluence of Culturas—a dynamic evening celebrating the state’s rich cultural heritage,” MPI said. “From Spanish and Mexican roots to African American, German, French, and Texana influences, enjoy live music, dance, immersive art, and cuisine that captures the spirit of the Lone Star State. Dive into a sensory-rich night of connection, culture, and unforgettable fun. Come curious. Leave transformed. Celebrate con cultura.”

Cleo Battle, President & CEO of Louisville Tourism, is being honored at the President’s Dinner on June 3 at the Tobin Center for the Performing Arts. The evening recognizes MPI Chapter Presidents and RISE Award recipients.

“A dedicated MPI leader and former Chair of the International

Board of Directors, he has long championed the power of community, collaboration, and giving back—helping shape both the industry and the future of MPI,” the association said of Battle.

On June 4, Visit San Antonio and MPI are closing out the WEC during Viva San Antonio at Mexico Ceaty.

“Set along the iconic San Antonio River Walk, this festive reception brings the city’s signature Fiesta spirit to life through bold flavors, lively music, and colorful cultural expressions,” organizers said. “Blending time-honored traditions with modern flair, the evening showcases San Antonio’s deep Mexican heritage and welcoming energy, creating an atmosphere filled with rhythm, warmth, and unmistakable Alamo City charm.”

The MPI Foundation (MPIF) is also getting in on the fun.

Joining with Visit Seattle, Pickleball for a Purpose on June 2 will be held at Texas Pickle Hall.

All skill levels are welcome.

The WEC’s biggest party, Rendezvous, will held at the at the 1902 Club.

“An unforgettable night in the heart of San Antonio,” MPI said. “Rendezvous brings the MPI community together for connection, celebration, and giving back. Enjoy great food, drinks, entertainment, and meaningful conversations, all in support of the MPI Foundation.”

Find more information [here](#).

NFL Selects Nashville to Host 2030 Super Bowl

By [Jonathan Trager](#)

The Nashville CVC has announced that the city will host the Super Bowl in 2030, bringing the NFL’s championship game to Tennessee for the first time.

NFL owners voted unanimously on May 19 to award Super Bowl LXIV to Music City and the Tennessee Titans’ new enclosed Nissan Stadium, which is scheduled to open in 2027. The game will be played in February 2030.

City and tourism leaders celebrated the announcement at an event in downtown Nashville on May 20 emceed by broadcaster Jim Nantz that highlighted the city’s music heritage and growing national profile.

“Hosting the Super Bowl is a defining moment for Nashville and Tennessee and reflects years of work to build Music City into a globally recognized destination for music, entertainment, and live events,” said Deana Ivey, President & CEO of the Nashville CVC. “This event is an incredible opportunity to showcase the dynamic and creative character of Nashville to a global audience and to deliver a Super Bowl experience

that is distinctly Music City, where music, sports, culture, and hospitality come together in a way few cities can match.”

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell credited Nashville’s successful hosting of the 2019 NFL Draft as a turning point in the league’s relationship with the city.

“That for us changed the future of the draft, arguably changed the future of the Titans and the community,” Goodell said. “And I think this is the next great step in a remarkable football journey and a great community in Nashville. We can’t wait to be there.”

League officials have long viewed Nashville as a future Super Bowl site once the Titans secured a domed stadium. Construction continues on the \$2.1 billion facility along the Cumberland River.

Peter O’Reilly, NFL Executive Vice President of Club Business and League Events, predicted the city would again set a high standard for league showcases.

“Super Bowl LXIV in 2030 is going to be a game-changer for the Super Bowl,” O’Reilly said. “Super Bowl LXIV in 2030 is going to be a game-changer for the NFL.”

“That for us changed the future of the draft, arguably changed the future of the Titans and the community,” Goodell said.

NEWS

Peter Lee Receives Global Ambassador Award from DI

By Jonathan Trager

Peter Lee, Executive Director of South Korea's Goyang International Expo Foundation, has received the 2026 Global Ambassador Award from Destinations International (DI) for his leadership in sustainable tourism and international collaboration in the meetings and events industry.

The award was presented on May 20 during the IMEX Frankfurt Gala Dinner, where DI recognized Lee for helping position Goyang as a major meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions hub in Asia.

Lee has led efforts to expand the city's international profile through the development of sustainable tourism initiatives and partnerships across the global business events sector. The organization cited his work with the Global Destination Sustainability Movement and the Korea Green MICE Alliance as key examples of his industry leadership.

Under Lee's leadership, Goyang has strengthened its position as a convention destination supported by KINTEX, one of Asia's largest convention centers. He also contributed to South Korea's National Competency Stan-

dards for the meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions industry and earned a doctorate focused on sustainability in the sector.

"Peter Lee exemplifies the spirit of global collaboration and innovation that the Global Ambassador Award represents," said Don Welsh, President & CEO of DI.

Lee previously received South Korea's President's Award from the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism in 2023 for contributions to the meetings and tourism industries. In 2024, the BBC recognized Goyang as one of five cities "making the world a better place," citing efforts to ensure tourism and business events deliver benefits to residents and local communities.

DI said Lee has been an active participant in DI's annual convention and

or a change of management; and more.

At USAE press deadline, HANYC's board of directors had voted in favor of ratifying the agreement, and HTC members—almost 30,000 hotel workers in the state—were scheduled to vote on May 21 but results had not been announced. However, the *New York Times* reported that HTC membership has "a history of voting in lock step with their leaders."

According to HANYC leadership, the new contract is significant, but the year-over-year wage increases are not as severe as is being reported, and the trade association was able to come to agreeable terms with the union.

"While it is substantial, it is not historical nor huge," Vijay Dandapani, President and CEO of HANYC, told USAE in an emailed statement. "Previous contracts had a 4% year-on-year increase and this is slightly over 5%."

The new IWA avoids a threatened strike ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup and America 250.

Dandapani noted in his statement to USAE that HTC had been ready to strike as negotiations were underway, going so far as to create a website—fi-

leadership initiatives, including mentoring emerging professionals through its 30 Under 30 program. He has also worked with the association to adapt

its Event Impact Calculator for the South Korean market and helped bring international collaboration programs to the region.



Peter Lee, Executive Director of the Goyang International Expo Foundation (Goyang CVB) in Goyang, South Korea, received the 2026 Global Ambassador Award from Destinations International (DI) during the IMEX Frankfurt Gala Dinner on May 20. Pictured here at center stage is Lee with Don Welsh (left), President & CEO of DI, and Ray Bloom (right), Chairman, IMEX Group.

NYC Hotel

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Currently, those workers are earning just below \$40 per hour, and by 2034, the final year of the IWA, they will earn just over \$61 an hour.

HANYC is comprised of almost 250 member hotels. Under the new contract terms, hoteliers in the city will be fully responsible for healthcare benefits for union employees and their families.

"The new agreement protects your free family healthcare for the life of the contract—without a single reduction in benefits and without passing any costs on to you," HTC President Rich Maroko said in an announcement about the contract to members.

The new IWA also provides an increase in employer contributions to pension funds during the first year of the contract; a new benefit fund to address rising costs associated with housing, child care, "and threats to your jobs"; the addition of Juneteenth as a paid holiday; fully paid parental leave; protections from AI and new technology; additional protections for immigrants during the sale of a hotel

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fahotelstrike.org—to guide travelers in the event of a strike or lockout should negotiations have failed.

In his letter to union members, Maroko said: "Our union used its political power to pass legislation that would make it easier for the public to support our boycotts and picket lines. If management forced a strike, New York City's consumer protection laws would kick in, and the hotels would be required to notify guests and offer refunds."

In addition, the union sought to establish a bill that would have limited the amount of square footage a room attendant could clean within the workday and imposed more stringent requirements for the employer-funded healthcare fund, Dandapani said.

"The important point is that the Union wielded its massive clout over

the City Council to threaten the industry with a square footage bill that would have increased wage costs by greater than 40% through limiting the square footage of rooms cleaned per day to 3,500 square feet (basically 10 rooms versus average quota of 14 rooms)," Dandapani said. "Anything in excess would have entailed double time for the entirety of the hours worked."

Given the initial demands from the union, Dandapani said HANYC "achieved significant reductions" in the new contract.

"In the end, NYC union hotel employers continue to provide the best wages and benefits in the industry across the U.S. through the significant headwinds...high costs, decreased in-bound travel, domestic and international, in the most regulated environment for hotels in the country," Dandapani said.

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NEWS

Caesars Entertainment Joins Las Vegas Food Rescue Efforts

Partners with The Just One Project

By Todd McElwee

Remaining dedicated to reducing food waste while increasing access to nutritious meals for individuals and families across the community, Caesars Entertainment has announced a new partnership with The Just One Project—one of Southern Nevada’s leading food access nonprofits.

The collaboration will significantly expand food rescue efforts tied to Las Vegas meetings, conventions and large-scale events through the nonprofit’s Food Rescue Alliance program.

“At Caesars, we’ve always believed that if we can make a difference, we should,” said Kiersten Flint, Sr. Vice President of Corporate Social Responsibility and Internal Communications for Caesars Entertainment. “For years, our teams have worked behind the scenes to make sure good food doesn’t

go to waste. Partnering with The Just One Project (TJOP) allows us to do that more consistently and at a much larger scale—especially through the meetings and conventions that bring so many people to Las Vegas.”

Through the partnership, excess food from select meetings and events at Caesars Entertainment resorts in Las Vegas will be recovered by The Just One Project, safely packaged and redistributed through The Just One Project’s Food Rescue Alliance. The alliance works with a network of nonprofit partners serving food-insecure individuals and families across Southern Nevada.

The partnership kicked off with a donation event on May 13. Flint was joined by Chis Skelding, Vice President of Meetings Operations; Eric Vaughn, Executive Director of Culinary Operations for Las Vegas



Caesars Entertainment donated \$50,000 to The Just One Project. Photo credit: Caesars Entertainment

Banquets; and volunteers from Caesars Entertainment’s HERO network. Brooke Neubauer, CEO, The Just One Project, and staff from the nonprofit also participated.

Food collected over the course of a recent four-day conference, including the volunteer event on May 13, totaled nearly 4,500 lbs. and provided 3,749 meals to individuals and families in need throughout the area. Caesars also donated \$50,000 to The Just One Project.

“What makes this partnership so powerful is how naturally it fits,” said Neubauer. “Caesars has the scale, and we have the ability to safely recover and distribute food quickly. Together, we’re making sure high-quality meals reach people who need them.”

The partnership creates hands-on opportunities for Caesars Team Members through the company’s HERO volunteer network, which connects them with nonprofit organizations in their communities. HERO volunteers will be able to support food rescue efforts by assisting in donation collection, packing and distributing meals and supporting other The Just One Project programs through direct and in-person service.

“Our HERO volunteers care deeply about this community, and this partnership gives them another meaningful way to show up,” added Flint. “At the end of the day, it’s about taking care of our neighbors, and doing it together.”

Find more information [here](#).

Loews Intent on Pittsburgh Convention Center Hotel

By Jordan Bradley

Loews Hotels signed a letter of intent to build a new hotel connected to the David L. Lawrence Convention Center in Pittsburgh, city officials announced on May 14.

The hotel is expected to have 500 guest rooms and a new restaurant.

The announcement of the Loews development “comes on the heels of Pittsburgh hosting the largest-ever NFL Draft—with more than 800,000 people—smashing prior predictions,” according to Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro’s office.

The city has been focusing on revitalizing its downtown sector. Recent projects have included refreshing Point State Park, installing a new four-acre outdoor civic space, Arts Landing, and modernizing Market Square, a beloved downtown public space supporting 49 businesses and more than 250 events annually. The city has also been prioritizing housing and residential conversion projects in the region.

Officials say Loews’ letter of intent is the next step in revitalization process.

“I’m proud of the progress we are making together to revitalize Downtown Pittsburgh and get stuff done for Western Pennsylvania—building more housing, creating safe and fun public spaces, and attracting businesses large and small to the Downtown neighborhood,” said Shapiro. “This investment from Loews Hotels, sup-

ported by Allegheny County Executive Sara Innamorato and Mayor Corey O’Connor, is another sign that Pittsburgh is on the rise, and it will help us bring even more exciting events like the Draft to Pennsylvania.”

The Loews Hotel project is expected to create 1,200 union construction jobs and 400 permanent union jobs, officials said. The hotel will also be given expedited entry into the PA Permit Fast Track Program, “which streamlines permitting for high-impact economic development and infrastructure projects through coordinated, transparent, and predictable interagency review,” according to the governor’s office.

Officials said a hotel connected to the city’s convention center has been discussed for two decades. It is expected to help grow the momentum already felt in downtown Pittsburgh.

“After more than 20 years of advocating for a hotel to serve as a front door to the convention center, I am proud to have played a key role in bringing the parties together to get this deal done. I thank Loews for their commitment to Pittsburgh and for their patience over the last 18 months of negotiations,” said Sen. Wayne Fontana, Chair of the Pittsburgh Sports & Exhibition Authority.

In an interview with CBS News, Pittsburgh Mayor Cory O’Connor said after the hotel’s groundbreaking is complete, construction is expected to take approximately 24 months.

EIC

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and business travel forecasts.

“Business events have demonstrated remarkable resilience and continued relevance in a complex global environment,” said Adam Sacks, President of Tourism Economics for Oxford Economics. “The findings show not only the magnitude of direct

spending and employment, but also the broader economic ripple effects created through supply chains, wages and local communities. The sector’s catalytic value—including business development, innovation, research collaboration and knowledge transfer—further underscores why business events matter to economies and societies around the world.”

Find more information [here](#).

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The Final Word

Headwinds...but the Sky Is Not Falling



By Amir Eylon, President & CEO,
Longwoods International

Memorial Day Weekend is already upon us, and now we begin the U.S. summer travel season. With all the headwinds the industry is currently facing, we are often asked to peer into our crystal ball.

We do this via our monthly updates of our ongoing American Travel Sentiment tracking study. This month, in addition to our regular look at economic and other concerns that may impact American travelers, we took a focused look at what impact(s) surging oil prices and the ongoing conflict in Iran are having on the mindset and plans for American travelers, as well as planned travel spending this summer compared to last year.

The crystal ball this month has five key takeaways:

1. Forty percent of American travelers say they are concerned that gas prices will greatly impact their travel plans within the next six months. This is up from 33% in April and 21% in March—an increase of 19 points in just two months! This will likely add to the pattern of shorter booking windows for regional travel.

2. Changing travel plans and re-allocation of travel spending in short to

mid-term response to the surge in gas prices greatly outweigh cancellations. Of those who intend to travel in the next six months, 36% are now planning to travel to destinations closer to home (down from 41% in April), and 37% are reducing the number of trips they are taking. Thirty-one percent are also reducing their spend on entertainment during their trips, down from 35% in April. The silver lining here continues to be that regional drive markets will see the greatest demand in response as folks opt for road trips over more expensive long haul air travel. Another silver lining is that those likely cancelling trips remains relatively low at 7% (-1 point since April).

3. Speaking of spending, almost one-third (31%) of American travelers indicate they plan to spend more on travel this summer compared to last year (up about six points from 2025), while 28% indicate plans to spend less on their summer travels this year (up just over five points from last year). This is a combination of both expectations of higher prices due to rising oil prices and inflation, as well as the “K-shaped economy” playing out with higher incomes continuing to spend at higher levels and lower incomes continuing to economize.

4. The Iran War is continuing to disrupt American travelers’ desire to travel abroad within the next 12 months. Twenty-five percent of American travelers say the war in Iran makes them less likely to travel internationally. Among those who reported the war is influencing their international travel, 39% will postpone their international trips and 19% will cancel their international travel. Perhaps the most important data point to note is that 37% say they will replace an international trip with a domestic one—up nearly six points from April alone! This points to another silver lining that there is an opportunity for U.S. destinations to convert these travelers who have a bit

more discretionary income.

5. Big Silver Lining: Demand for travel in 2026 continues at high levels. Despite all the headwinds, 90% of American travelers still indicate travel plans to go somewhere within the next six months! Once again, travelers will be seeking value (good opportunity for promotions), and this will still be a year of the “Great American Road Trip!” Bottom Line: Expect high visitor volumes in many destinations with an overall decline in per person spend at this point.

At the end of the day, it will be a very robust summer travel season. It’s not a question of if they will come; it’s a question of how much will they spend?

Rockford Council Approves \$103M for Hard Rock Expansion

By Jordan Bradley

The city council of Rockford, Illinois, is ready for its constituents to rock—hard.

In a May 18 council meeting, members approved the sale of \$103 million in bonds to fund construction of an expansion of the Hard Rock Casino, which plans to build a 215-255-room hotel and a 15,000-square-foot convention center.

Of the 14 council members, 11 voted in favor, two were absent and one member—Alderman Frank Beach—voted against the bond sale.

As part of the sale, the city of Rockford will retain temporary ownership of the hotel and convention center in a public-private partnership until the Hard Rock property pays off a buyout requirement sometime in the next seven to 10 years. Until the debt is paid off, Hard Rock will continue to manage the property, as per the agreement.

Beach reportedly cited concerns over this portion of the sale.

“What, ultimately, protection do we have, period, to get our money back?” Beach said in an interview with local news station WIFR ahead of the vote.

In a May 11 letter of recommendation for the bond sale from Todd Cagnoni, Rockford City Administrator, and Carrie Hagerty, City Finance Director, the pair note that “the only meaningful exposure to the City would be the unlikely scenario in which the integrated hotel and casino cannot service the bond

from operations. In this situation we backstop bond payment with regional gaming tax and other taxes from the casino to not impact property taxes to residents.”

Supporters of the bond sale posit that investment in and bolstering of the Hard Rock Casino Rockford’s efforts to expand will benefit the community with a forthcoming new-build casino project just across state lines.

Accountant and Alderman Jaime Saldago voted in favor of the proposal.

“I always like to look at ROIs, return on investment, and what the return on investment will be is the additional gambling revenue that’s going to come out of it and more jobs,” Saldago said at the meeting.

“We’re incredibly grateful for the continued support from Mayor McNamara and the City Council as we take another exciting step forward together,” said Geno Iafra, President of the Hard Rock Casino Rockford. “Approval of this bond initiative keeps the momentum going on a project we believe will bring even more energy, opportunity, and visitors to Rockford. The hotel and convention center are a big part of our vision for the future and further solidifies Rockford’s position as the premier regional entertainment destination. We can’t wait to bring this project to life and provide the community with job creation and new revenue.”

With the bond sale now approved by the Rockford City Council, Hard Rock expects to break ground on the expansion later this year.