



To welcome attendees to Alamo City for the WEC, Visit San Antonio and MPI placed a billboard on the highway leading from the airport to downtown. The WEC is being held from June 2 –4. Credit: Visit San Antonio

## Philadelphia Hotel Workers Set Deadline for Strike

By [Jordan Bradley](#)

The Philadelphia hotel union has issued a strike deadline of June 12 in an effort to move contract negotiations along at six hotels ahead of the 2026 FIFA World Cup and America 250 festivities.

Unite Here Local 274 is warning guests and hotel representatives that “labor disputes are possible at any time” at the Hilton Garden Inn Center City, the Sheraton Downtown Philadelphia, the Warwick Hotel Rittenhouse Square, the Wyndham Philadelphia Historic District, the Hilton Philadelphia at Penn’s Landing, and the Four Points by Sheraton Philadelphia Northeast hotels.

Local 274—which represents more than 4,000 hotel and hospitality workers across the city’s stadiums, hotels, and airports—is seeking an increase in worker wages from \$19 to \$30 over the life of the next contract for non-tipped workers, workload reductions, increases in pensions,

affordable family healthcare, protections for immigrant workers, and protections against sexual harassment by guests.

According to the union’s website, labor disputes “can include picketing outside a workplace or a strike. During a strike, regular employees will not be there to scrub the toilets, change the sheets, cook the food, or take out the trash. Picket lines, which involve chanting, loud drumming, and other noise, may persist for 24 hours per day.”

At a May 20 rally held outside the Philadelphia World Cup host committee headquarters, Local 274 President Rosslyn Wuchinich said union members are prepared to strike at the six remaining hotels through the Fourth of July if contract terms aren’t agreed to by the deadline, according to local news outlet WHYY.

“Our members are prepared to

sacrifice for themselves and for all working people to have a living wage in our city,” Wuchinich said at the rally, according to WHYY.

“We want this summer to be one for the history books. But its success will not be on the backs of hotel workers,” said Maciah Magloughlin, a restaurant server at the Wyndham Philadelphia Historic District.

Throughout the last year, the union has been in negotiations with several Center City hotels over the last year and has held multiple strikes, including at the Hampton Inn Center city, the Sonesta Rittenhouse Square, and the Sheraton University City. Ultimately, the union and hotels agreed to raising non-tipped workers’ wages to \$30 an hour by January 2028, Local 274 said. The increase will mark a 57% raise.

**“Our members are prepared to sacrifice for themselves and for all working people to have a living wage in our city,” Wuchinich said at the rally, according to WHYY.**

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► Downtown Silver Spring

# MEET IN MARYLAND'S MONTGOMERY COUNTY



► Lone Oak Farm Brewery

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# HOTS

*HOTS Seeking Puppetmaster... A police department in Stoneham, Massachusetts, sent out a social media plea for the identity of the owner of a very creepy, oversized marionette puppet that someone turned in to the station, according to UPI. The puppet in question is a 7-foot, 7-inches tall clown with no eyes—oh, and he’s animatronic. “We are attempting to locate the owner of this puppet that was turned into the station,” the post from the Stoneham Police Department said. “If this belongs to you—or if you recognize it from your nightmares—please contact us to arrange pickup.” HOTS can definitely understand why someone would hand the creepy doll*

*over to the police—he’s a public nuisance for sure.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*HOTS Wing Walker... A 98-year-old British World War II vet recently set a new Guinness World Record, and HOTS knows you won’t guess for what. Harry Heasman is now the oldest wing walker, after he spent more than 9*

*minutes standing atop a flying plane at the Duxford Airfield in Cambridge on May 24. “I have dreamed of doing this since I was a young child and to finally live that dream at 98 years old and to be a Guinness World Records title holder is beyond anything I could have ever imagined,” Heasman told Guinness World Records, who were on hand to certify the record. According*

*to UPI, Heasman spent 11 months preparing for the attempt, working with a physical trainer to get his body and mind ready for the stunt. Heasman’s attempt not only fulfilled his dream but also raised money for the Lennox Children’s Cancer Fund in tribute to his wife and son, both of whom died after battles with cancer, UPI reports. HOTS thinks this is one inspiring airman.*

## U.S. Travel’s IPW 2026 Welcomes the World

By Todd McElwee

U.S. Travel Association’s IPW 2026, held in Greater Fort Lauderdale in late May under the theme of “Unites the Industry to Welcome the World,” drew nearly 5,000 delegates from more than 60 countries.

More than 75,000 appointments occurred this year at the event, which

organizers said helped build momentum for the future of international inbound travel to the United States.

U.S. Travel said the theme of IPW 2026 underscored the essential role international travelers play in the U.S. economy and the industry’s united effort to expand international visitation in the years ahead. The inbound show drives nearly 11 million international

visitors to the United States over three years—generating \$26.1 billion in spending, supporting 63,000 American jobs and producing \$3.3 billion in tax revenue.

“At a moment when the competition for international travelers has never been more fierce, the U.S. travel industry showed up in force,” said Geoff Freeman, President & CEO, U.S. Travel Association. “IPW isn’t just a trade show, it’s a down

payment on billions in future spending, thousands of American jobs, and the global reputation of the United States as a destination that wants to be visited.”

Visit Lauderdale rolled out the welcome mat for global delegates, curating events and experiences that put Greater Fort Lauderdale’s beautiful beaches, entertainment and culture on full display.

“IPW 2026 was an incredible opportunity to showcase the energy, accessibility and continued evolution of Greater Fort Lauderdale to travel professionals and media from around the world,” said Stacy Ritter, President & CEO of Visit Lauderdale. “We were proud to highlight the experiences, hospitality and connectivity that continue to make Greater Fort Lauderdale a standout destination. The connections made throughout the week will continue to drive meaningful business and visitation to our community for years to come.”

New Orleans is hosting IPW 2027. Find more information [here](#).



Geoff Freeman, President & CEO, U.S. Travel Association

## NCBMP and AAMA Announce a National Strategic Partnership

By Todd McElwee

Seeking to help cities compete more effectively for conventions, tourism investment, major meetings, and workforce opportunities tied to the growing visitor economy, the National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals (NCBMP) and African American Mayors Association (AAMA) have announced a national strategic partnership.

Formalized through a newly executed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), the agreement establishes a collaborative national framework connecting municipal leadership, destination organizations, convention industry stakeholders, tourism executives, and private-sector partners to create measurable economic outcomes for cities and communities across the country.

The groups said the partnership

comes at a critical time as municipalities face increasing pressure to compete for conventions, tourism investment, workforce talent, and economic development opportunities amid shifting federal priorities and evolving economic conditions.

Jason Dunn, CEO, NCBMP, said: “This partnership represents a new model for how cities, industry leaders, and association professionals can work together to drive measurable economic growth, expand workforce pipelines, and create broader access to opportunity. The meetings, conventions, tourism, and hospitality industries are among the most powerful economic engines in the country, generating billions in economic activity and supporting millions of jobs nationwide. Through this collaboration with AAMA, we are ensuring more communities, professionals, and businesses are posi-

tioned to participate in and benefit from that growth. This partnership is rooted in access, opportunity, and economic competitiveness.”

“America’s cities are competing aggressively for investment, conventions, tourism dollars, talent, and economic opportunity,” said Phyllis Dickerson, CEO of AAMA. “This partnership reflects a practical, results-oriented approach to ensuring our communities are positioned to compete and thrive in the future economy. By connecting municipal leadership with industry expertise and strategic partnerships, we are creating pathways for job creation, economic mobility, entrepreneurship, and long-term community resilience.”

The partnership represents one of the first coordinated national efforts connecting municipal leadership

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WEEKLY NEWS OF ASSOCIATIONS CYBER AND HOTELS

# USAE

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## Women Leading the Way

# Tammy Canavan Knows the Power of Community

By Jordan Bradley

Growing up in Vancouver, Canada, in an age where pop culture was full of television shows such as *Hotel*, *Fantasy Island* and *Love Boat*, Tammy Canavan, FCDME, President & CEO of Visit Seattle, “thought it would be really glamorous to work in hotels.”

However, she didn’t have “any big ambitions” when she envisioned her life in hospitality, Canavan told *USAE*.

“I wanted to be at the front desk, greeting these people from all over the world, and meeting these interesting people—and there is nothing glamorous about working in hotels, nothing,” she said. “Or any of the other work that I’ve done.”

Like many in the destination organization realm, Canavan holds the belief that “most of us wind up here by accident,” she said, and to say she’s made the most of it is an understatement.

Canavan is Visit Seattle’s first female President & CEO, but Visit Seattle isn’t Canavan’s first leadership role. Directly prior to joining the destination management organization (DMO), Canavan led the Tacoma Regional CVB from 2008–2012, and the Monterey County CVB in California from 2012–2019.

But before her tenures as head honcho, Canavan started her career in the destination side of tourism at Destination Greater Vancouver (formerly Tourism Vancouver). During her 11-year tenure there, “I had 10 different titles” thanks to then-CEO Rick Anderson, Canavan said, “who’s a legend... he just is, I think, one of the most extraordinary leaders of our time.”

She worked in marketing, membership, visitor services, community engagement, and tour and travel for the organization, she said, during “a time where DMOs were just kind of getting their legs under them.”

Outside of her DMO experiences, Canavan has spent time working in home sales and for consulting and organizational development firms focused on DMOs.

In the fall of 2019, Canavan joined Fired-Up! Culture, and when the pandemic hit “instead of acquiring clients, we set up this support platform and had calls just with CEOs from wherever that wanted to call in—just so they knew they weren’t alone—and we would talk about the leadership issues that people were facing during Covid,

and how they needed their own support system. When life sucks, everybody looks to the DMO for leadership.”

When Tom Norwalk retired from Visit Seattle in spring of 2022, Canavan saw an opportunity she couldn’t pass up. During her time with the Tacoma CVB, she had become very familiar with the neighboring DMO, and she had come to admire the community.

“I always knew that if I was going to come back from this consulting work that I really loved, that Seattle was where I really wanted to land,” Canavan told *USAE*. Part of that is because I love the city so much, and part of that is because the community here is really extraordinary. It is a community that puts their shoulder to the wheel to find long-term solutions as well as short-term ones, and supports itself.”

Reflecting on her experiences with leadership, Canavan has held the same aspirations from her first role: to be a leader invested in the team she leads and the community the team represents, to help those around her grow, and overall to be a “catalyst for good.”

Part of being that catalyst manifests in Canavan’s unrelenting support for and uplifting of other women in the industry. This was evident from the first email exchange between *USAE* and Canavan: while coordinating a time to speak, Canavan was pitching other female DMO leaders. She’s also one of the founding members of SWWGSD (which stands for: Smart Women Who Get Shit Done), a long-standing club for women within the DMO industry.

Around 15 years ago, women in positions of leadership in the DMO landscape were rare, and the “six or eight of us” began to gather at annual conferences and CEO summits, Canavan recalled. The group gathered for support and to discuss questions and dilemmas like: “How do we talk about the glass ceiling? How do we sort of advance in the industry for our gender?” and so on.

In the time since its humble beginnings, SWWGSD has grown to be an annual gathering at Destination International’s Annual Convention that has come to require sponsors “because we’ve got 300–400 people” showing up to the event. There are even pink name tag badges distributed at the convention.

Seattle is a city full of female leadership across industries—from Seattle

Convention Center’s Jennifer LeMaster and the Friends of the Waterfront’s Jay Shigaki to the Seattle Sports Commission’s Beth Knox and newly elected Seattle Mayor Katie Wilson—and the spirit of SWWGSD lives on in other facets of Canavan’s professional life. Every year, Canavan and other women in positions of leadership throughout Seattle gather with the sole purpose of creating community and connection amongst themselves.

“There’s no secret, there’s no agenda, there’s no meetings, there’s no dues,” Canavan said. “There’s nothing like that, but [we’re] making sure that we’re all connecting. When our new mayor was elected—she’s young, she’s new to politics and we’ve gotten together with her just as a group of women business leaders and said, ‘We want to help you be successful.’”

Part of that effort is a culture of mentorship within SWWGSD, Canavan said, with more seasoned members being encouraged “to always respond positively to young people that reach out, so accept mentorship invitations” and, yes, even interview requests from trade journalists.

Turning to the topic of Seattle’s goings-on, Canavan is openly excited about the 2026 FIFA World Cup. The city will host its first match between Belgium and Egypt on June 15, and when Canavan spoke with *USAE*, the infrastructure and the community of Seattle were abuzz with logistics.

“I’m excited for the vibrancy that it’s going to bring,” Canavan said. “I think that our city thinks it knows what’s coming—and it has no idea. People are talking logistics right now, right? It’s like: ‘What’s transit going to be like? Should I park? Are there no car zones?’ They’re thinking of the nuts and bolts, and I’m really excited for just the energy that is going to come with [the matches]...because there’s a lot of frustration right now.”

During her time at Tourism Vancouver, Canavan was part of a successful bid to host the Olympic Winter Games, “and I remember that I didn’t get to stay for when we hosted it [in 2010] to see the turnaround in attitudes.”

Outside of the infusion of energy, Canavan is looking forward to the legacy that hosting World Cup matches will leave with Seattle.

“We’re a major city on the West Coast, but when we look at our size compared to a New York or an L.A., we’re a pretty small town,” said Ca-



navan. “It’s not unusual, if I’m going somewhere, I will see somebody on the street [that I know]. I think that [the World Cup] is going to be extraordinary in building community pride and building awareness and legacy globally for Seattle.”

To further that vision, the city’s local organizing committee has been focused on building new soccer facilities for underprivileged youth and the revamping of the Seattle waterfront, which introduced an overlook walkway connecting Pike Place Market to the natural feature.

“We’re really blessed with a city that focuses on a lot of improvements, and having the World Cup here has been an amazing catalyst,” Canavan said.

Local infrastructure updates such as expanded transit and an improved airport facility are also thanks to the games, Canavan said.

Canavan is also “super excited” about the success of Visit Seattle’s newest brand campaign, Mother Nature City, which launched in November last year.

In less than a year, the campaign has brought in more than \$17 million of economic impact, “and it really does resonate both with our values as a community grounded in sustainability and accessibility, and honoring the planet and nature,” Canavan said. More than that, it’s resonating with audiences globally across the meetings and events industries and leisure travel audiences.

Looking forward, Canavan said that the organization is focused on leaning into being a DMO “that is nimble enough to respond to changing market conditions or headwinds or opportunities, and at the same time provide that business intelligence and that leadership for our community, so that we can bring them along with us and continue to build the visitor economy to benefit our community.”

VISIT  
seattle

# NEWS

## ASAE Announces Exceptional Leadership Honorees for 2026

By Todd McElwee

Highlighting individuals who have demonstrated exemplary support of ASAE, the association community and society at large, ASAE on May 26 announced the 2026 recipients of the Individual Honors for Exceptional Leadership.

The 2026 honorees include Steven C. Anderson, FASAE, CAE, IOM, President & CEO, The National Association of Chain Drug Stores (NACDS), who is receiving this year's Key Award; Danielle Duran Baron, MA, MBA, FASAE, CAE, AAIP, Vice President of Marketing, Communications & Industry Relations at the School Nutrition Association, who is receiving the Professional Performance Award; and Mariama Boney, CAE, LMSW, CPEC, SHRM-SCP,

President and CEO, Achieve More LLC, who is receiving the Academy of Leaders Award.

"Every year, the Individual Honors Committee has the privilege of reviewing leaders who represent the very best of association management," said Alexis Redmond, JD, MA, CAE, Sr. Director, NSSLHA at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, and Chair of the ASAE Individual Honors Committee. "At a time of rapid change and growing complexity, associations are essential to the future of industries, professions, and communities. This year's recipients embody being driven by mission and purpose. They serve as catalysts in their organizations, across their professions, and throughout the association

community. Their example raises the bar for what our entire profession is capable of and the lasting impact we all can make."

The Key Award recognizes chief staff executives of associations who demonstrate exceptional leadership and a lasting commitment to the value and impact of voluntary membership organizations. Anderson is the 81st recipient of the honor.

Earlier this year, Anderson announced his intention to retire following two decades of leadership. During his tenure, he transformed NACDS' institutional infrastructure, expanded its influence and positioned it for long-term success and sustainability.

Anderson served as Chair of the ASAE Board of Directors from 2021–2022 and Chair of the ASAE Re-

search Foundation from 2020–2021. In 2020, ASAE named him an ASAE Fellow. He was a frequent emcee of the Summit Awards.

"ASAE sets the standard for excellence in our profession, and to be recognized by my peers with the Key Award is a tremendous honor," he told *USAE*. "I have long believed that effective leadership is about stewardship—understanding the moment an organization is in, bringing people together to move forward. That same spirit of shared purpose has made ASAE such a meaningful community throughout my career, and I'm grateful for its partnership and for the dedicated association professionals it brings together to advance their industries."

Please turn to page 12

## New Orleans' Convention Center Honors Morial Award Winners

By Jonathan Trager

The New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center and its partners recognized both a growing Louisiana small business and one of the state's largest economic engines during the sixth annual Morial Awards ceremony celebrating leadership, innovation, and community impact.

Leroy's LipSmack'n Lemonade was named Small Business of the Year, while Port NOLA received the Corporation of the Year award during the May 21 event at the Morial Convention Center's Great Hall.

The awards are presented annually by the convention center, the Ernest N. Morial New Orleans Exhibition Hall Authority, and the Urban League of Louisiana. Established in 2019, the awards program recognizes companies and organizations that promote economic opportunity, innovation and long-term investment in Louisiana communities.

Jim Cook, President & CEO of the convention center, said this year's honorees reflected a vision of inclusive economic growth.

"These awards recognize businesses and leaders that are creating opportunity, strengthening communities, and driving meaningful impact across our state," Cook said.

Leroy's LipSmack'n Lemonade, founded in 2012, has grown from a local lemonade stand into a regional beverage company with products

sold at retail stores and sporting venues across Louisiana. The company also supports charitable initiatives benefiting children with special needs and local children's hospitals.

The business was inspired by founder Leroy Hayward III's experiences with autism and hearing loss, according to organizers.

"Receiving the Morial Award is truly meaningful for our team," said owner Sherilyn Hayward. "Small businesses play an important role in shaping Louisiana's economy and communities, and we are proud to be part of that story."

Port NOLA, officially the Port of New Orleans, was recognized for its contributions to international trade, transportation, and regional economic development. Founded in 1896, the port operates along the Mississippi River and serves as a hub for cargo shipping, rail transportation, and cruise operations.

"We are deeply honored to be recognized as this year's Morial Award recipients," said Beth Branch, President & CEO of Port NOLA and CEO of New Orleans Public Belt Railroad. "This recognition reflects the collective efforts of our employees, partners and stakeholders who help drive lasting impact across our state."



Members of the Morial Awards Advisory Committee, Morial family, and representatives of the New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center and Urban League in late May presented a \$5,000 dollar check to the Small Business of the Year Morial Award Winner, Leroy's LipSmack'n Lemonade.

## Vermont to Claim Home of First All-Electric Marriott Hotel

By Jordan Bradley

The town of Winooski, Vermont is preparing to welcome its first hotel—and Marriott International's first ever all-electric hotel.

The Sugar House Hotel, a Marriott Tribute Portfolio hotel, is expected to open its doors to guests this August. When it does, it will be the first hotel in the world to operate without the use of fossil fuels, according to local developer Nedde Real Estate; instead, the property will be powered by geothermal energy and solar power, according to local news outlet WCAX.

The hotel will have 115 guest rooms and is designed to achieve net-zero energy and LEED Platinum certifications.

The Sugar House Hotel is named in honor of Vermont's legacy of sugar houses, the cabins or struc-

tures built to produce maple syrup. To further honor the state's history, the hotel will name each guest room after an historic sugar house, according to WCAX.

"Our goal was to create a building that wasn't just in Vermont, but of Vermont," said Doug Nedde, principal of Nedde Real Estate. "By pursuing LEED Platinum and net-zero energy status, we are working to prove that the future of hospitality can be both luxurious and sustainable."

The property will also feature a rooftop restaurant and bar, flexible meeting and event spaces, and a fitness center. According to Nedde Real Estate, the hotel's rooftop restaurant and bar will be the only one in the region and will offer guests panoramic views of the Winooski River, Vermont's Green Mountains and New York's Adirondack Mountains.

# NEWS

## Mitch Whitten Tapped to Lead Visit Fort Worth

By Jonathan Trager

Visit Fort Worth has promoted longtime executive Mitch Whitten to President & CEO, selecting a familiar face to lead the city's growing visitor economy as officials prepare for a major convention center expansion and continued tourism development.

Whitten, who has spent 13 years with the Texas tourism organization and most recently served as COO, succeeds Bob Jameson, who led the group for 13 years and retired at the end of April.

"After a significant national search, Mitch was the clear choice to lead Visit Fort Worth," said Susan Alanis, Chair of Visit Fort Worth. "His track record in putting Fort Worth on the map through innovative marketing and organizational leadership will serve us well in the years ahead."

Whitten is taking the helm of Visit Fort Worth at a time when city leaders

are investing heavily in hospitality infrastructure, including the planned expansion of the Fort Worth Convention Center, scheduled for completion in 2030.

The city's tourism sector has become an increasingly important part of the local economy as Fort Worth continues to grow. A recent "State of the Fort Worth Visitor" study commissioned by the organization found Fort Worth was the nation's fastest-growing tourism destination over the previous five years.

"This is an important moment for Fort Worth, and I am proud of the team we have assembled to accelerate our progress on the national stage," Whitten said. "The city's investments in the convention center, in Dickies Arena, and in other hospitality venues and attractions create a once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver jobs and support local business."

Over the past decade, Whitten

helped shape Fort Worth's "Modern West" tourism branding while taking on broader leadership responsibilities inside the organization. His priorities as CEO will include growing convention business and building on initiatives such as the Fort Worth Sports Commission, the Fort Worth Film Commission and Hear Fort Worth, a local music initiative.

Whitten, who has lived in Fort Worth for 30 years, joined Visit Fort Worth in 2013 as vice president of marketing and communications. He previously worked at Southern Methodist University (SMU), where he helped lead branding and fundraising campaigns, including efforts surrounding the opening of the George W. Bush Presidential Center.



Mitch Whitten

A graduate of SMU and the University of Virginia, Whitten earlier in his career worked as a reporter for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and in corporate communications for Pier 1 Imports.

## Hilton's STiR Uses All the Right Ingredients for Delicious Hotel Dining

By Jordan Bradley

Food and hospitality are inseparable.

As the Sr. Director of Food and Beverage development in the Americas at Hilton and the head of the company's in-house creative consultancy, STiR Creative Collective, Nathaniel Brethold knows this inherently.

"I can't underscore this enough: we have the best role in the organization," Brethold told *USAE*. "We are ingrained in every bit of the food and beverage experience, and especially with what's happening in our market with hotels... Guests are really gravitating [towards] and picking hotels based upon the food and beverage experiences, not just the rooms and the proximity. They

want to be entertained, so STiR creative is really designed to do just that."

Brethold is passionate about good food and about providing a stellar customer experience. He knew "very early on what I wanted to do in my life and in my career," he told *USAE*. "I actually started working in the restaurant business when I was 15 years old, just for some gas money and to buy a car. But then I joined a luxury hotel company" as a banquet server at 17.

"I knew this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life," Brethold said. "I saw buffets being done intricately. I did not come from an upbringing with a lot of privilege."

Growing up, he devoured shows on the Food Network, and eventually went to culinary school at Johnson &

Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island, before he returned to the aforementioned luxury hospitality company (a Hilton competitor that he tactfully declined to name) immediately after graduating.

Throughout his career, Brethold has held food and beverage leadership roles at The Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, Loews Hotels, One Off Hospitality Group, NoHo Hospitality Group and CoralTree Hospitality.

When he joined Hilton as the head of food and beverage development last November, Brethold "was really excited because STiR is part of my operation. This is what we do on a daily basis: we're going to be able to create all these really relevant restaurants and bars."

Travelers are increasingly seeking unique and outstanding dining experiences at hotels. Trend reports for food and beverage flavors are everywhere at the start of the year, and there is a sustained emphasis on locally sourced and inspired meals.

How do hotel chains serve up customizable dining experiences to meet the shifting desires of travelers? For Hilton, the answer comes in the form of its in-house creative consultancy, STiR Creative Collective.

Launched in January 2024, the collective serves up a new menu for owners within the Hilton franchise family featuring a la carte services that span strategy, concept and branding, and more.

The creative agency is responsible for food and beverage concepts at

Hilton properties around the globe, including several domestically: the five restaurant and bar concepts at the Conrad Orlando and the five vastly different concepts at the Signia by Hilton Atlanta.

"At Hilton, we understand the undeniable importance that hotel food and beverage programs have on the guest experience," said Chris Silcock, President of Global Brands and Commercial Services at Hilton at the time of STiR's launch, adding that with "the introduction of STiR Creative Collective, we have the unique ability to work with our owners, operators, and hotel teams to tailor our food and beverage innovations to meet the evolving needs of our guests, together, arming those groups and the industry at-large with meaningful solutions that drive revenue and brand loyalty."

Over the last two and a half years, the STiR team has continued to respond to market trends, creating and helping to launch concepts at Hilton properties nationally.

One such concept includes Junction Café & Provisions, which debuted at the Hilton New Orleans Riverside earlier this year. The concept blends offering reliable market staples and brands while also providing locally made merchandise as well as grab-and-go market items made with ingredients often used in local cuisine to create a high-end market where guests can connect with their host city. More locations are set to debut later this year, according to Hilton representatives.



The interior of the Leonessa at the Conrad New York City

# USAExchange

## Conversation with Tyler Orwig, Chief Sales Officer, Visit San Antonio



professionals at once. It also allows an opportunity to closely align with MPI WEC as true event partners, allowing us to produce, for example, the opening and closing events and to inform the Learning Journeys part of the program as well as to inform other critical elements of the program. Hosting a meetings industry event is exponentially powerful way to shine the brightest light on San Antonio—to experience the destination firsthand.

**USAE:** Tell us about new developments in San Antonio's hospi-

San Antonio Hotel & Spa featuring 253 rooms and more than 21,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor space.

**Venues:** Phase two of Civic Park opened in early 2025. It is a part of the Hemisfair District redevelopment—home of the 1968 World's Fair and adjacent to the Henry B. González Convention Center. It includes five acres of public parkland, a five-pooled water feature, and a great lawn area that can accommodate large events up to 15,000.

Also, opened in 2025, The Ralston at the San Antonio Zoo is a one-of-a-kind event venue that blends sophisticated design with an unforgettable natural setting. Perched atop historic quarry walls, the space offers sweeping views of the zoo, the San Antonio skyline, and the immersive Congo Falls gorilla habitat. With capacity for up to 500 guests and flexible indoor-outdoor configurations, The Ralston is ideal for receptions, galas, and corporate gatherings seeking a truly distinctive experience.

In 2024, San Antonio welcomed Pullman Market at Pearl featuring 40,000 square feet of full-service restaurants, artisan butcher and fishmonger concepts, unique team building classes, and much more. The Creamery District also opened in 2024. Once a historic dairy plant, the Creamery has been thoughtfully reimaged into a stylish multi-venue complex. With original steampunk piping, soaring vaulted ceilings, and vintage machinery preserved throughout, it blends industrial charm with modern elegance.

**Airport:** One of the most exciting

things happening in San Antonio is the expansion of the San Antonio International Airport (SAT). The \$2.5 billion plan for expansion includes building a new terminal with expected completion in 2028. This will greatly increase our number of gates and flights. In addition, short-term improvements to SAT include three additional gates being added to the existing terminal facility, an expansion of the existing baggage claim system, and new and enhanced airport concessions.

**USAE:** What surprises visitors most about your city?

**Orwig:** How verdant and walkable San Antonio is. When folks first see the area from a plane to when they immerse themselves along the River Walk, we are told how surprised they are with the lush, green San Antonio. And, even as America's seventh largest city, we are compact. It's an easy stroll from the convention center to event venues, restaurants, shops and 5,000 hotels rooms within one block of the center (15,000 downtown and almost 50,000 citywide).

**USAE:** How would you like WEC attendees to feel when they depart San Antonio?

**Orwig:** Like they have been truly immersed in the authenticity and culture of one of America's most historic—and most forward looking—cities. It is our hope that they experience the unique blending of cultures here—from African American, Spanish, Indigenous, Mexican, German and more—and that our Texas-sized hospitality has warmly welcomed them and made them feel like family. And of course, like they are excited to bring their meeting here!

*Visit San Antonio is ready to roll out the red carpet for MPI's WEC. USAE connected with Orwig a few days before the arrival of a few thousand attendees to discuss his city, hosting a meetings industry event, and more.*

**USAE:** What are you most excited for when MPI comes to town?

**Orwig:** San Antonio is proud to host MPI's World Education Congress, a premier gathering that empowers event professionals through cutting-edge education, meaningful networking, and fresh inspiration. Our city's rich history, vibrant culture, and unmatched hospitality provide the perfect backdrop for attendees to expand their expertise and enjoy an unforgettable experience.

**USAE:** Is hosting a meetings industry event different from hosting a conference from an outside sector, and if so, how?

**Orwig:** Yes! Rather than showcasing to one association or meeting professional, we are showcasing the Alamo City's best to hundreds of meeting

professionals.

**Orwig:** There's so much, but here's a quick update:

**Hotels:** The much-anticipated 200-room Monarch San Antonio, part of the Curio Collection by Hilton portfolio, opened in March, bringing 15,000 square feet of meeting space. This luxury hotel is located on the edge of Hemisfair's Civic Park near the Henry B. González Convention Center and walking distance to the River Walk and the Alamo.

In 2025, The Gunter Hotel, which opened in 1837, completed a \$57 million renovation with refreshed guest rooms (311 total), redesigned meeting spaces (20,000 sq ft), rooftop pool, new dining/bar venues, and a music-themed vinyl library concept.

In 2024, San Antonio welcomed several new downtown hotels—the 347 room Kimpton Santo, featuring 13,000 square feet of event space with a historic atmosphere; the InterContinental San Antonio Riverwalk, An IHG Hotel, with 390 rooms and 18,000 square feet of meeting space; and the Plaza

and accountability reporting; develop public-private partnership models connecting municipalities, destination organizations, and industry stakeholders; and institute workforce initiatives designed to expand participation across the visitor economy.

"The partnership is expected to serve as a national model for how municipal leadership, destination organizations, and industry stakeholders can work collaboratively to drive inclusive economic growth through the meetings, tourism, and hospitality sectors," the organizations said.

### NCBMP

*continued from page 3*

directly with Black meeting professionals, destination organizations, and hospitality industry stakeholders to drive long-term economic competitiveness.

Through the agreement, the organizations will jointly develop and implement national policy forums and executive convenings focused on tourism growth, convention attraction, and destination investment; conduct economic research, benchmarking,



The Cobb Convention Center Atlanta in late May celebrated the placement of the final steel beam in its \$190 million expansion and renovation project. The construction tradition of "Topping Out" saw members of the Cobb-Marietta Coliseum & Exhibit Hall Authority, the staff, and the construction team sign the final steel beam, which was also adorned by an American flag and a tree. The tradition of placing a tree atop a structure has its origins in Scandinavian culture, dating back over a thousand years.

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# NEWS

## Cleo Battle to Be Celebrated at MPI's President's Dinner

By **Todd McElwee**

Officially, Cleo Battle, President & CEO, Louisville Tourism, is being honored by MPI during the President's Dinner on June 3 at San Antonio's Tobin Center for the Performing Arts.

MPI said Battle is being recognized for his transformative leadership in destination marketing and his lasting impact on the meetings sector. Everyone attending knows, however, it's really a dinner amongst friends, as Battle considers MPI his professional home and a prime place to connect within the industry.

"MPI has been my professional home for much of my career, Battle told *USAE*. "Serving on committees and boards alongside some of the best

leaders in our industry helped me grow both personally and professionally. It strengthened my leadership skills, expanded my network, and elevated not only my own professional brand, but also the visibility of Louisville as a destination. Serving as Chair of the International Board of Directors was especially meaningful because it gave me the opportunity to help shape conversations around the future of our industry."

Battle shared how he felt when he was notified of the honor: "I was truly humbled when I got the call. To be recognized by MPI, an organization that has meant so much to my career, was incredibly special. I started in this industry as a bellman, so there was definitely a moment where I reflected

on that journey and all the people who helped shape it along the way."

Asked why he would encourage someone entering the meetings industry to join and become active with MPI, Battle said: "This industry is built on relationships, and MPI is one of the best places to build them. Joining MPI gives young professionals a community, mentors, education, certifications, and leadership opportunities that can truly shape a career. I always tell people that when you raise your hand to volunteer, you may not realize it at the time, but you're building the experiences and relationships that will open doors later in your career."



Cleo Battle

## ASAE Honorees

*continued from page 7*

Duran Baron is the 52nd recipient of the Professional Performance Award. It honors association executives who have made significant contributions to their organizations and the association community while serving in senior leadership roles other than CEO.

At SNA, Baron leads marketing, communications, and industry relations strategy. A respected leader in the association community, she is a DELP Scholar, an ASAE Fellow (2023), and a published author. Active across ASAE governance, ethics, advocacy, and credentialing initiatives, Baron will chair the ForesightWorks Advisory Group beginning this August.

She is also the former board chair of Luminus Network for New Americans, a Maryland nonprofit dedicated to helping immigrants thrive.

"When I got the call, I choked up," she told *USAE*. "That probably tells you everything about what it means. Ten years ago, I became an ASAE DELP (Diversity Executive Leadership Program) Scholar. Someone handed me a mirror and showed me what was possible. I haven't looked away since. So, this feels like a full circle moment, but also a responsibility. This profession changes lives. And I'm grateful every day that it chose me as much as I chose it."

The Academy of Leaders Award highlights consultants and industry partners who have demonstrated

exceptional support for ASAE and the broader association community. Mariama S. Boney is the 39th recipient.

Boney is a nationally recognized leadership strategist, executive coach, facilitator, and strategic advisor. She has guided associations and nonprofits across more than 100 industries through transformational change, strengthening governance, leadership, culture, and performance. A respected thought leader, she is the author of numerous articles published in *Associations Now* and through the Forbes Coaches Council, as well as three books.

"Looking back, I see grace everywhere—in the opportunities, the people, the lessons, and the journey," she told *USAE*. "This Academy of Leaders

Award carries the hope, fingerprints, and prayers of countless people who helped shape the path—from family and friends to mentors, colleagues, clients, and the association community. This recognition reminds me that, as visionary executives, it is time to lead more boldly with resilience, creativity, and brilliance to shape our communities, and our world. I am honored to continue serving as well as creating bold, safe spaces and initiatives where people, teams, and associations can be better, achieve more, and maximize results."

The Individual Honors for Exceptional Leadership will be presented during the 2026 ASAE Annual Meeting & Exposition, August 15–18 in Indianapolis.

## Hilton's STiR

*continued from page 8*

For Hilton franchise owners, STiR is a valuable resource.

"We're a one-stop-shop for ownership to understand that Hilton has this engine within it that focuses solely on the restaurant and bar experiences that you would be getting when you're entering a Hilton hotel," Brethold said. "Lifestyle primarily does a lot of their own operations within that independently unless it's in the managed portfolio, but we also can play within the state of that."

Within the scope of the creative concept work, STiR "fulfills three buckets," Brethold said: bespoke work, scalable brands, and management of third-party relationships.

The Leonessa at the Conrad in downtown New York City is the most recent example of a bespoke concept from STiR. Situated on the rooftop, the Leonessa is a cocktail bar providing "a refined cocktail experience," according

to the outlet's website, and offering views of the Hudson River, Jersey City and the Statue of Liberty. STiR designed the concept from the floor to the ceiling specifically for the Conrad, Brethold said.

One of the newest scalable brand concepts from Hilton is piebird, a contemporary take on American classics and specialty pies rooted in Americana nostalgia. The brand was designed for DoubleTree by Hilton properties. The first concept opened last month at the DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel in Nanuet, New York.

The third aspect of STiR, managing third-party relationships, sees the creative agency helping to guide ownership in navigating relationships with the top chefs of the culinary world. Past collaborations have included Chef Michael Anthony and his partnership with the Lex Yard at Waldorf Astoria New York; and Chef José Andrés and the Chef José Andrés Group's collaboration at Bazaar Meat at Waldorf Astoria Washington DC and multiple concepts at the Conrad Los Angeles.

For Brethold, the increased focus on high quality dining experiences is rooted in our desire to not only be nourished, but also to be truly delighted by our choice in hotel restaurant.

"At the end of the day, people love going to restaurants to be entertained," he said. "They want to get into

the dialogs with the bartender. They want to understand what's really exciting and new. They want to meet the chefs, to see this beautiful food. But they're also want that comfortability, that 'I'm making a decision that I'm not going to regret.'"



Junction Café & Provisions opened its first location at the Hilton New Orleans Riverside in February.

# Scene at Indianapolis 500



# BIG SAVINGS

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# TAMPA BAY



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A photograph of the Caesars Palace building in Las Vegas at night. The building is illuminated with warm lights, highlighting its classical architecture with columns and statues. A large, illuminated sign on the building reads "CAESARS PALACE" in a stylized, golden font. The sky is dark, making the building's lights stand out.

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# In Tampa Bay, Every Meeting Is a Big Event

What makes Tampa Bay the perfect place for meetings of all sizes? Simply ask meeting professionals who've experienced the destination firsthand. A meeting professional said, "Our experience planning an event in Tampa Bay was exceptional. Tampa was an ideal choice, a vibrant, accessible city with a wide range of excursion options that appealed to every type of participant. The collaboration between the hotel and Visit Tampa Bay was seamless, creating a highly curated and elevated experience for attendees. Once you go, you get it."

From seamless collaboration between Visit Tampa Bay and top-tier venues to a walkable waterfront downtown, Tampa Bay delivers an elevated, thoughtfully curated meeting experience. With versatile offsite excursions, standout food and beverage, and a destination that appeals to every attendee type, planners consistently describe Tampa Bay as a place where meetings feel effortless and memorable.

**Award-winning venue. Unforgettable meetings.**

The [Tampa Convention Center](#) packs award-winning service, innovation and economic impact into 600,000 square feet of event space. With a 36,000-square-foot ballroom and 52 meeting rooms — 27 overlooking the water — the venue won ConventionSouth's Best of the Best Convention Center Readers' Choice Award. Plus, it received Northstar Stella Awards three years in a row, a Smart Stars Award from Smart Meetings and a Tampa's Best Award. All while earning LEED Silver certification from the U.S. Green Building Council.

**Where you stay matters.**

Tampa Bay offers more than 1,500 new hotel rooms — plus over 3,000 rooms within walking distance of the Tampa Convention Center. Whether

you prefer boutique style or luxury brands, you'll find your match including waterfront hotels like the Grand Hyatt Tampa Bay and The Westin Tampa Bay, as well as the conveniently located Tampa Airport Marriott.

**Culinary highlights.**

Tampa Bay's culinary scene serves options to fit every occasion and taste. Guests can savor renowned flavors from MICHELIN-recognized restaurants or dine in style in the hip, wellness-focused Water Street neighborhood. Just outside the Convention District, there are two food halls — Sparkman Wharf and Heights Public Market at Armature Works. Each offers a variety of innovative dining choices and entertainment in a lively waterfront setting.

**Easy access by air.**

Tampa International Airport (TPA) offers nonstop flights to 80+ domestic and 10 international destinations — and is just 15 minutes from downtown. A new terminal with 16 gates is coming in 2028.

**Unlock savings and incentives.**

Whether you're planning a large convention or a team retreat, the Visit Tampa Bay team offers discounts and deals for meetings and events of all sizes.

At the center of the program is the [Partner Match+ hotel savings](#) option. When you select a participating hotel, you can receive an additional financial incentive — up to \$2,500 per event.

Partner Match+ also gives you savings without sacrificing the convenience guests expect. You get to choose from modern, stylish hotels offering easy, fast routes to attractions, award-winning dining, Tampa International Airport and more.

In addition to savings and flexibility, Partner Match+ provides extra benefits. For example, at the Renaissance Tampa International Plaza Hotel, any



Discover the Tampa Convention Center, where stunning waterfront views along the vibrant Tampa Riverwalk create a memorable backdrop for meetings, events and gatherings of all sizes.



Head to Sal Y Mar, the rooftop bar and events venue atop the dual-branded Aloft and Element hotel in Midtown Tampa, offering skyline views and an elevated setting for group dinners, receptions and casual business gatherings.

event or room block reserved in 2026 comes with complimentary carbon offsets. [Explore the latest savings opportunities](#) to find the right option for your event.

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Host outdoor meetings at DoubleTree by Hilton Tampa Rocky Point Waterfront hotel where bay views and open-air space create a clear, focused setting that balances work with a relaxed atmosphere.



Experience Armature Works, where The Heights Market offers a lively setting for team dinners and gatherings, with standout options including MICHELIN-recognized Oak & Ola.

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# The Power of Face-to-Face Meetings at MGM Resorts



MGM Resorts and Bellagio Las Vegas

In a world driven by digital technology, one thing remains clear: when people come together, business moves forward. At [MGM Resorts](#), we've long believed in the power of face-to-face meetings to drive your business.

The [2026 Global Economic Significance of Business Events Study](#) – for which MGM Resorts is a proud founding sponsor – was recently released sharing the power of in-person meetings driving stronger relationships, deeper engagement, and measurable business outcomes.

### The Data Behind Human Connection

- The business events industry represents a \$1.6 trillion global marketplace, underscoring the scale and importance of meetings and conventions worldwide.
- 67% of professionals say building relationships through face-to-face interaction is the most difficult outcome to replicate digitally
- Up to 22% of new customers are generated through in-person events
- Organizations estimate they would lose significant revenue without live meetings

These insights confirm what we've always known: meetings are not simply about gathering - they are about creating momentum, trust, and growth.

### Investing in the Future of Meetings



Mandalay Bay Convention Center Redesign

At MGM Resorts, meetings and events are at the heart of what we do and we are constantly investing in our resorts and meeting infrastructure so our clients are never experiencing the same Las Vegas twice. From large-scale renovations like the [Mandalay Bay Convention Center](#) redesign to enhancements across our guest rooms, dining, and entertainment offerings, we are continually reimagining what a modern meeting experience can be. Our goal is simple: create environments where ideas thrive and attendees feel inspired every time they visit.

### Unmatched Scale, Flexibility and Value

When it comes to hosting events, scale and variety matter. [MGM Resorts](#) offers:

- Over 4 million square feet of flexible meeting and event space
- More than 40,000 guest rooms and suites
- 13 distinct resorts along the Las Vegas Strip
- Hundreds of unique venues ranging from boardrooms to outdoor and open-air options to arenas

This level of scale allows planners to design meetings that align precisely with their goals, whether that means hosting a global convention or an executive retreat.

But what truly sets us apart is that this scale exists within a single, fully integrated portfolio. In many destinations, achieving this level of variety requires coordinating

across multiple companies. With MGM Resorts, everything is connected—making it easier to design complex, multi-layered programs seamlessly.

### A Seamless Experience for Planners

We understand that successful events start long before attendees arrive. That's why we've reimagined how we support planners. Recently, MGM Resorts introduced a streamlined sales structure designed to make doing business easier than ever for an enhanced customer experience.

Our portfolio is now supported through dedicated teams overseeing our Las Vegas resorts, enabling:

- Streamlined points of contact across multiple resorts
- Faster response times and more customized proposals
- Simplified contracting and coordination

With 13 resorts on the Las Vegas Strip, this structure allows us to operate as one cohesive ecosystem - giving planners the flexibility of many destinations with the simplicity of one partner. The result is a more efficient process that allows you to focus on what matters most: delivering a successful meeting.

### Designed for Impact - Not Just Attendance



Yoga on the Mandalay Bay Beach

Meetings should do more than bring people together – they should leave a lasting impact. At MGM Resorts, we are [Focused on What Matters](#), with a focus on fostering a culture of respect, supporting our communities and investing in environmental stewardship. We also recognize the importance of wellness as part of the meeting experience, so attendees arrive inspired and leave feeling refreshed.

### Our approach brings meaningful experiences to life through:

- Integrated wellness offerings that support attendee well-being, from yoga on the Mandalay Bay Beach to catering options designed to keep attendees energized
- Opportunities for community engagement and giveback programs
- Sustainable practices, including solar electricity that powers up to 100% of MGM Resorts' Las Vegas Strip daytime power needs
- Programs like Feeding Forward, through which we've donated more than six million meals to those in need—turning meeting activity into meaningful community impact

### Something New, Every Time



MGM King remodeled room at MGM Grand

One of the biggest advantages of hosting meetings with MGM Resorts is that no two visits are ever the same.

Our resorts are constantly evolving, with new:

- Restaurant concepts like [CARBONE RIVIERA](#) at Bellagio and [Gymkhana](#) at ARIA

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## Where Check-Ins, Breakouts and Nights Out Are Just Steps Away

### *That's Buffalo For You*

Give your meeting attendees a city they can enjoy after the day's agenda has wrapped. Our compact downtown keeps your people within an easy stroll from the [convention center](#) to the hotel and back again.

Make [every meeting memorable](#) in Buffalo's downtown where historical architecture has been revitalized, and discover vibrant restaurants, breweries, museums, and nightlife. So, whether it's first arrival, breakout sessions or after-hours fun, there's less downtime — and more to do.

#### Effortlessly Walkable

From curtain calls to last calls, consider Buffalo a [choose-your-own-adventure](#) kind of city. The convention center puts you a few easy blocks from theater and live music performances, dining options and more. It's also a short walk from Canalside, the year-round waterfront

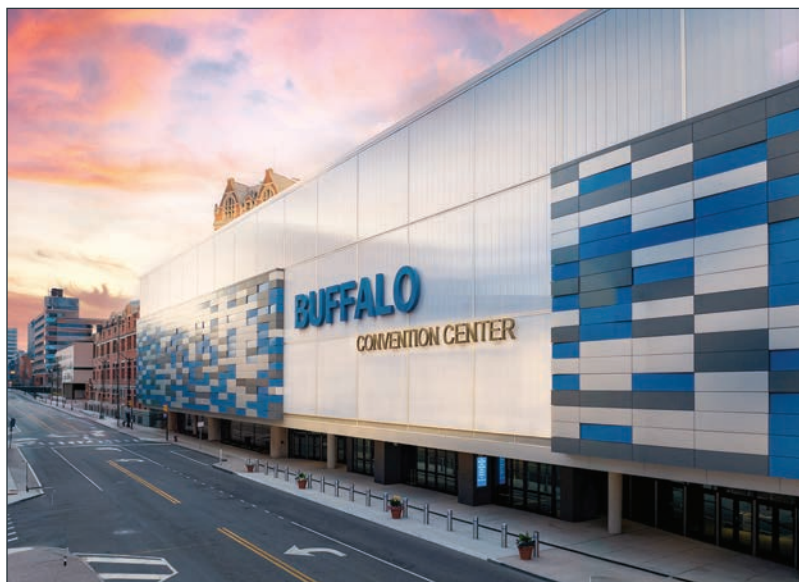
district, where you can find sunset sails on Lake Erie and winter ice skating, perfect for memorable team outings.

#### Historically New

Buffalo's character is rooted in its history, revitalized to meet modern life. Host your event or reception in [a memorable space](#) at The Richardson Hotel, Buffalo AKG Art Museum, Frank Lloyd Wright's Martin House, Buffalo RiverWorks and the Michigan Street Baptist Church. Really, your group activities can be as adventurous or laid-back as you'd like. What matters most is that everyone will have a fantastic time.

#### We'll Set You on Your Path

Consider Visit Buffalo another member of your team. We're here to help schedule site visits, source RFPs, and arrange itineraries and transportation. We can even assist with public



relations and social outreach.

And we go a step further. Qualify for our [Convention Center Incentive Package](#) and you and up to three people will enjoy a two-day visit with your airfare and hotel stay covered, giving you the opportunity to experience our

city before you bring your attendees. Come see how a city rich in character can also be refreshingly affordable. Explore more planning possibilities at [VisitBuffalo.com/Meetings](#) or reach out to the events team [here](#).



## MGM Resorts

*continued from page 18*

- Immersive entertainment and experiential venues like [Tailgate at Mandalay Bay](#)
- Renovated and redesigned spaces like the newly [remodeled rooms and suites at MGM Grand](#)

This continuous reinvestment means your attendees will always experience something fresh, ensuring higher engagement and stronger attendance over time. And in Las Vegas - where attendance increases when meetings are hosted here - these experiences become a powerful driver of participation and excitement.

#### The Advantage of Las Vegas

Choosing the right destination is just as important as choosing the right venue. Las Vegas offers a unique com-

ination of accessibility, infrastructure and energy:

- Located less than three miles from Harry Reid International Airport
- Direct flights to more than 150 cities worldwide
- A destination built to support meetings at every scale

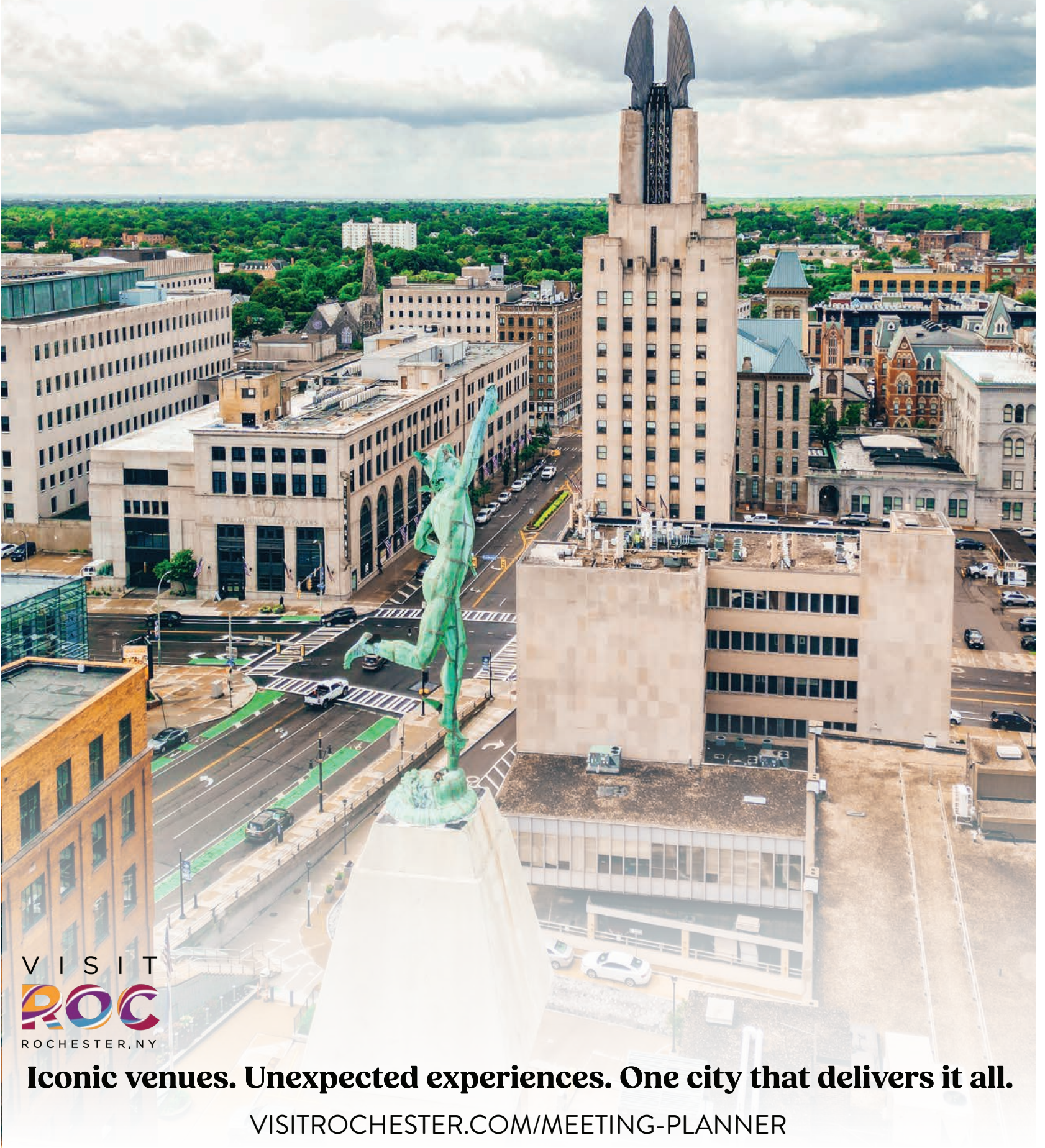
This ease of access not only simplifies logistics—it helps maximize attendance and ROI.

At MGM Resorts, we are proud to invest in that future—supporting the research that proves its value and building the experiences that bring it to life. Because when people come together with purpose, the impact is undeniable. For exceptional in-person events that draw upon inspirational venues, expertly trained staff and responsible business practices, you have to be here.



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# Omaha Fits Your Meeting and Makes You Look Good.

Meeting planners know the pressure: deliver a seamless experience, impress attendees and stay on budget, all while making it look effortless. Omaha makes that easier than you might expect. Stop at the Visit Omaha booth #700 at MPI World Education Congress to see how.

The professional bra fitting is back by popular demand. A trained fit specialist will be at the booth to help you find your size and send you home with something to show for it. It only takes five minutes, and it's one of the most useful things a planner can do for themselves during the conference. This year's takeaway is as tailored as last year's: choose a complimentary pair of leggings or receive a discount toward a bra, delivered to your door. Omaha wants to help you find the perfect fit.

Omaha has more than \$9 billion in development in progress, and three of the biggest investments directly shape the convention experience. CHI Health Center Omaha is completing a \$200 million expansion that will bring the facility to 420,000 square feet — including 90,000 square feet of brand-new construction and 25 new breakout rooms — for a total of 41 breakouts when it opens in 2027. That's substantially more room for planners to work with, and more flexibility in how it can be used. Breakout sessions, general sessions, exhibition space and networking areas can all coexist without compromise. Next, Omaha's airport is undergoing a nearly \$1 billion modernization set to double the terminal size, streamline security and baggage claim and expand non-stop service when complete in 2028.

And The RiverFront — a \$325 million, 72-acre urban park along the Missouri River — is already open, with three distinct parks, a lakeside amphitheater, a sculpture garden and a Skate Ribbon that converts between roller skating in summer and ice skating in winter. It's an immediately usable asset for planners looking to extend the event experience beyond the convention walls.

Omaha is an affordable Midwest destination. Another number worth noting: coffee at CHI Health Center Omaha costs under \$50 per gallon. In a business where F&B costs can quietly wreck a budget, that matters. The value extends to dining, drinking and accommodation without compromising quality.

Getting here is simple. Omaha's airport is less than five minutes from the convention district — no long transfers, no rental cars, no logistical headaches between the gate and the meeting room. Omaha sits near the geographic center of the country, putting most major U.S. cities within a two-hour flight and making it an easy drive from throughout the region. That access pays off in attendance numbers. Once your group arrives, more than 3,600 hotel rooms are within a mile of CHI Health Center Omaha, and a skywalk connects the convention center directly to the 600-room Hilton Omaha. The district is walkable and safe. Omaha's historic Old Market Entertainment District has cobblestone streets, chef-led restaurants, patio bars and independent shops and is a short walk from the convention center. Attendees can enjoy the destination without a car or



Gene Leahy Mall at The RiverFront



CHI Health Center Omaha (rendering)

a complicated itinerary. And the new free-to-ride streetcar, coming in 2028, will loop from midtown to downtown, connecting convention hotels, entertainment districts and key attractions.

When your program calls for something beyond the ballroom, Omaha has offsite options that hold up. Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium, ranked No. 1 in the country by USA TODAY 10Best, offers private dining at Scott Aquarium, cocktail receptions by the elephant habitat or a full buyout of the 160-acre property — an evening event worth trumpeting about. Joslyn Art Museum, recently expanded after a major renovation, houses more than 12,000 works spanning 5,000 years of art history; planners can rent individual galleries or the full museum for leadership dinners and receptions. The Durham Museum inside Omaha's landmark 1931 Union Station is a restored Art Deco building that makes a strong impression for evening events and closing ceremonies. Lauritzen Gardens offers 100 acres of indoor and outdoor botanical space for relaxed receptions and networking. There are more than 20 themed gardens to explore, including a model train garden that operates May through October. And Kiewit Luminarium, an 82,000-square-foot science discovery center at Lewis and Clark Landing at The RiverFront, features more than 100 hands-on exhibits involving physics, earth science, biology, geometry, fabric arts and finance. The science center rents its spaces for private events, which includes access to all

the experimental fun — plus, it is conveniently situated directly behind CHI Health Center Omaha on the banks of the Missouri River.

Ready to wrap this up? Hosted Buyers and Speed Networking participants who stop by the Visit Omaha booth will receive an exclusive gift: a premium travel cardigan valued at \$99. Consider it a fitting reminder that, in Omaha, planners are treated as pampered partners.

The booth will also host a Corporate Social Responsibility activation throughout WEC. Visit Omaha is collecting gently used bras and new socks to donate to the Battered Women and Children's Shelter of San Antonio at the end of the conference. The shelter provides emergency housing, counseling and advocacy to survivors. Bra and sock donations are among the most requested items. It's a simple way for conference-goers to make a meaningful difference during the event. A collection box will be at the booth throughout the conference. Stop by to drop something off. And pick something new up.

Omaha is a city that makes planners feel supported from the first site visit to the final night of the event. The airport is close, the convention district is compact and safe, the F&B pricing is honest, and the offsite options are distinctive. Uplifting.

**Stop by the Visit Omaha booth #700. Get fitted. Pick up your gift. Drop off a donation. Then picture your next meeting in Omaha.**



Heartland of America Park at The RiverFront

# HOUSTON

REIMAGINING THE MEETING EXPERIENCE



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The transformation of the George R. Brown Convention Center campus – anchored by the new GRB South building – will connect world-class venues, plazas, and parks into a seamlessly walkable district in the heart of downtown.

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While we build for the future, the GRB remains fully open and operational, welcoming conventions and events that continue to define Houston as one of the most dynamic destinations in the meetings industry.



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90,000 sq. ft. – Ballroom Space

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10,000 sq. ft. – Rooftop Park

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