



Visit Savannah President & CEO Joseph Marinelli, along with CVB staff members DeeAnn Gesling and Shelina Vinson (left), joined the National Praline Day mascot and the candy makers at River Street Sweets to celebrate the holiday. National Praline Day was June 24.

Hotel Workers Strike in Downtown Philadelphia

By Jordan Bradley

Nearly 200 workers at a downtown Philadelphia hotel walked off the job on the morning of June 21, one day ahead of a 2026 FIFA World Cup match between France and Iraq at Lincoln Financial Field.

The unionized hotel workers of Unite Here Local 274 at the Sheraton Philadelphia Downtown hotel are seeking contracts guaranteeing \$30 an hour wages by January 2028, expanded access to family health-care, a reduction from 16-room daily housekeeping quotas to 15-room daily quotas, and more.

On June 24, union workers set up a picket line at the Warwick Hotel, which is also operating without a contract with Local 274 workers.

Union leaders say comparable, nearby hotels have achieved new contracts that meet Unite Here's demands, but Sheraton representatives are not willing to meet their contract demands.

According to Local 274: "Sheraton workers struck for four days in the fall along with workers at the Hampton Inn Center City and the Wyndham Historic District, both of which have since rat-

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Dallas Council Rejects Redesign for Convention Center

By Jonathan Trager

The Dallas City Council on June 24 moved forward with the current design direction for the \$3.8 billion Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center redevelopment, keeping the project on track while avoiding a major redesign that city officials say could significantly increase costs and delay construction.

The 9-6 decision preserves a

long-running plan to rebuild and expand the aging downtown facility, which city leaders consider essential to maintaining Dallas' competitiveness in attracting national conventions and large-scale events.

The project has been the subject of ongoing debate over whether to alter elements of its design to preserve transportation access between southern Dallas neighborhoods and

downtown. City staff have warned that revisiting those elements could add roughly \$597 million in costs and push completion to 2030 or later.

The convention center redevelopment project is expected to include roughly 2.1 million square feet of new and renovated space, including expanded exhibit halls, meeting rooms, and event facilities. Officials have

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U.S. Travel Assn., GREAT USA Coalition Convene Congressional Symposium

By Todd McElwee

Taking place on June 24 on Capitol Hill, the GREAT USA Sports & Travel Congressional Symposium brought together stakeholders from the sports, travel, hospitality, entertainment and business communities, as well as policy leaders from across Capitol Hill.

Participants explored travel facilitation, transportation and infrastructure

readiness, visa policy and international access, security considerations and the long-term economic benefits of major global events.

U.S. Travel Association hosted in partnership with the GREAT USA Coalition and the Senate Travel and Tourism Caucus.

"The 2026 World Cup is showing exactly what we've been saying for years: America wants visitors,"

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Sharon Wyman Tapped to Lead Discover Long Island

By Jonathan Trager

Discover Long Island has appointed Sharon Wyman as its new President & CEO, elevating a longtime executive who has spent nearly a quarter-century with the New York destination organization.

Announced on June 25, the appointment follows a comprehensive search. Wyman succeeds interim head Mitch Pally, who has led the organization for more than a year following the departure of former leader

Kristen Reynolds in 2025.

Wyman joined the organization in 2001 as an information coordinator in visitor services when it operated as the Long Island Convention & Visitors Bureau & Sports Commission. Over the next 25 years, she advanced through a series of leadership positions, most recently serving as COO.

Wyman said she's "incredibly honored to be entrusted with the role of President & CEO."

"Discover Long Island
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NEWS

Hotels Welcome World Cup Fans with Style, Enthusiasm

By Jordan Bradley

As cities across North America host international travelers and football enthusiasts, U.S. hotels are sprucing up spaces and preparing staff to welcome 2026 FIFA World Cup fans.

In the City of Brotherly Love, the Four Seasons Philadelphia launched The Match Room, a separate space occupying the foyer and two meeting rooms on the hotel's 59th floor.

Decked out in plush velvet seating, ambient lighting and plenty of screens to catch a game, The Match Room provides locals and travelers alike with a space that transports them into a relaxed, intimate space with good food and good-natured competitiveness.

Cornelia Samara, General Manager of the hotel and a Regional Vice President with Four Seasons, told *USAE* that the team at the Philadelphia hotel knew that there would be an influx of guests, "and we wanted to create a space—a sports lounge—where they can enjoy the matches right here."

The ironing out of details began more than a year ago, but the "full transformation" of the space unfolded in the space of a week, "so it was really fun to watch," Samara said.

According to Samara, the World Cup matches and America 250 have been hot topics of conversations for the entirety of her five-year tenure with the property.

She and the hotel's staff have "talked about 2026 as a big year for us, and really a year to propel the city even further in the future, because it's going to be in the limelight. And to have it here now, and seeing the wonderful things that are coming together, the entire community and all of our international fans that are here, it's really wonderful to see."

To celebrate that, the concept for The Match Room was developed to be "really rooted in bringing guests together over shared moments of celebrations and the games, competition," Samara said. "We wanted to have a sports lounge that has this identity of style and an elevated experience."

Outside of the design aesthetics of the space, The Match Room offers a curated menu that both elevates the lounge experience and grounds it in the spirit of Philadelphia with classic sporting event fare like soft pretzels with pimento cheese or truffled and Parmesan fries, and into the more fanciful caviar service paired with Laurent-Perrier Champagne.

The Match Room can be booked through July 19 on Open Table by both hotel guests and Philly residents. The lounge is open every day between 11:30 a.m. and 11:30 p.m.—but adjusts those times to accommodate matches when necessary—and is chic enough to require a dress code.

Samara said the response has been



The Kansas City Marriott Downtown's video wall is the largest in the city.

strong—to say the least.

"One of the questions that people are asking us is 'Can you keep it like this?'" Samara said. "We've been selling out. The response has been incredibly strong and very, very positive."

In another sports-centric U.S. city, the Kansas City Marriott Downtown is providing football fanatics with the opportunity to catch every moment of World Cup match action on the largest indoor video wall in the city.

"It's massive," said Kansas City Marriott Downtown General Manager Dustin Holcumbrink.

At 16 feet tall and 32 feet wide, "it's just so prevalent the moment that you walk in the front doors of our hotel, and we've had soccer matches on it nonstop throughout the World Cup," Holcumbrink told *USAE*. "We like to say we're a nonstop watch part for all things soccer right now, especially matches hosted here in Kansas City."

In addition to the video wall, Holcumbrink said the hotel worked with partners to bring signage and branding to life on the Marriott's exterior and interior spaces "to help those international visitors understand just how

excited we are here in Kansas City to welcome them to our destination."

Holcumbrink and his team spent months preparing for the influx of international fans of the most beautiful game, partnering with Visit Kansas City and the Hotel Association of Greater Kansas City to gather "just as much information as we could about the culture and the languages and the expectations of those countries that we knew were going to be hosting for matches, as well as those countries and fans that we knew had selected Kansas City for base camps."

Holcumbrink said the hotel's front-line staff did a lot of prep and education on cultural customs and language ahead of the games. To support easier communication, the Kansas City Marriott Downtown also invested in relay devices, which are two-way communication devices capable of translating conversations in real time. The devices provide a bridge between staff and guests, and feature 23 different languages.

"Our housekeeping department has utilized that internally for a couple of

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Strike

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ified contracts at the new standard."

"We told them we were ready to strike the World Cup. They could have easily avoided this by signing the contract," said Francine Heason, a room attendant at the Sheraton. "We are not worth less than the other hotel workers in this city and we are going to fight for what we deserve."

The Sheraton Philadelphia Downtown is owned by Miami-based investment firm CL Hotels and managed by Aimbridge Hospitality.

When asked by *USAE* about the impact of the strike on hotel services, the atmosphere of the hotel during matches, and the state of contract negotiations, the Sheraton's general manager declined to comment and referred *USAE* to Aimbridge officials.

In an emailed statement to *USAE*, an Aimbridge representative said: "We respect our team members' rights to engage in legally protected activities and look forward to reaching a fair contract. While discussions are ongoing, we remain committed to ensuring our guests enjoy their stay."

Aimbridge representatives did not

elaborate further.

According to the union's website, the Sheraton is one of four union hotels where contracts have expired. At press deadline, the Sheraton Downtown Philadelphia was the only hotel where union employees were on strike.

However, Local 274 noted the remaining three hotels—the Hilton Garden Inn Center City, the Warwick hotel Rittenhouse Square, and the Four Points by Sheraton Philadelphia Northeast—were at risk of strike action.

In a June 22 social media post, Rep. Ben Waxman shared his support of the union.

"Let me be clear, Philly is a union town!" Waxman wrote. "This morning, staff from my office picketed alongside Unite Here Philadelphia and hotel workers fighting for better conditions at the Sheraton Downtown. There is no reason, while Philly is expecting record tourism, that employees should continue working without a contract and struggling to meet their basic needs."

The union has also received support public from the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers and Philadelphia City Council President Kenyatta Johnson.



The Match Room, a limited-time World Cup watch sports lounge, in the Four Seasons Philadelphia

HOTS

HOTS Hear Ye A New Record... The Guinness World Records had found the loudest individual on the planet. Coming in at 122.4 decibels, Joseph McGrail-Bateup earned the record for the loudest ever shout by an individual, the Associated Press reported on June 23. That decibel range is equal to a chain saw, a jet aircraft take-off, and an ambulance siren at close range, AP said. McGrail-Bateup, of Canberra, Australia, earned the title by shouting the word "now." He beat out the previous record holder, Annalisa Flanagan, a schoolteacher in Northern Ireland who set the record in 1994 with a 121.7 decibel shout of the word "quiet," iron-

ically. McGrail-Bates told AP: "There's no way that you can actually practice for it. You have to just keep it for the day, especially with the world record attempt." After his Guinness World Record attempt, McGrail-Bates said his voice "was shot for the next couple of days." This isn't the first recognition that McGrail-Bateup has received for his vocal abilities; he has also been the honorary town crier for Canberra since 2017, and he even won a 2024 Ancient and honorable Guild of Australian Town Criers competition with the loudest "Oyez, Oyez, Oyez" at 98 decibels, AP reports. HOTS is all ears for McGrail-Bateup's next feat.

✱ ✱ ✱ ✱ ✱

HOTS Gracie, Come Home!... Residents of remote Real County, Texas, are being asked to notify authorities if they spot a giraffe that has been missing from her privately-owned preserve for two weeks. Gracie, a 3-year-old giraffe, accidentally escaped from her enclosure at the Cedar Hollow Ranch in Texas Hill Country, the Associated Press reports. Ranch owner Vic Jones told the outlet that Gracie had been grazing in a remote portion of the property when she wandered into an area on a hillside with rocky ledges to eat "that none of the other giraffes had ever gone on before. And when she came down off of there, there

came down on the wrong side of the gate." Jones is offering a \$5,000 reward for information leading to Gracie's discovery after a failed helicopter search. According to Jones, a handful of sightings have trickled in, but Gracie is still on the loose. Real County Sheriff Nathan Johnson said that Texas Hill Country "has one of the largest concentrations of exotic captive animals in the country," the AP reports. "I've had wildebeests, I've had water buffalo, I've had monkeys, I've had zebras, all go missing," Johnson said. "Sometimes we recover them, and sometimes we don't." HOTS is listening intently for the necks update on Gracie's whereabouts.

Elke Geraerts Headlining PCMA's Convening EMEA 2026

By Todd McElwee

Psychologist, bestselling author, and performance expert Dr. Elke Geraerts, Founder of Better Minds, will headline PCMA's Convening EMEA 2026. The event is headed to Lisbon, Portugal, from September 13-15.

Citing AI exploding, attention spans shrinking and events strategists challenged more than ever before, PCMA said her address is coming at a critical moment.

"We are operating in a time where attention is fragmented, expectations are rising, and the value of coming together is being questioned in new ways. Connection is no longer incidental to events—it is their purpose," said

Sherrif Karamat, CAE, President & CEO, PCMA and CEMA. "If we are to remain relevant as an industry, we must move beyond designing programs to intentionally designing human outcomes. That means understanding behavior, building trust at scale, and creating experiences that go beyond informing to transforming how leaders think, connect, and act."

Geraerts is the author of *The New Mental*, *Authentic Intelligence*, *The Mental Reset*, and *Focus is the New Gold*. PCMA noted she is known for translating science into

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U.S. Travel

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said Geoff Freeman, President & CEO, U.S. Travel Association. "Across the country, Americans are welcoming visitors into their communities, sharing their culture and giving the world a firsthand look at who we are. Those experiences are generating goodwill, reshaping perceptions of the United States and demonstrating the value of international travel at a time when America is losing ground globally. This moment is proving Americans will show up when the world comes to us. The challenge now is creating more opportunities for them to do so."

Over the next decade, the United States will host a series of major global events, including the 2028 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games in Los Angeles, and the 2034 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games in Salt Lake City. These events are expected to draw millions of international visitors into the United States, generating hundreds of billions of dollars in economic impact while also placing unprecedented demands on

U.S. travel systems.

"The U.S. has entered an unprecedented decade of global sporting and cultural events, creating a tremendous opportunity to drive economic growth and strengthen our position as a leading travel destination," said Stewart Verdery, Executive Director of the GREAT USA Coalition. "This timely forum brings together policymakers, federal agencies and industry stakeholders to spearhead the challenges and opportunities that come with hosting major global events and ensure America continues to be a premier destination for international visitors."

Dallas

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described the project as a cornerstone of downtown economic development tied to long-term tourism and hospitality growth.

Supporters of maintaining the current design have argued that additional delays would threaten Dallas' ability to compete for conventions already booked years in advance.

Visit Dallas President & CEO Craig Davis warned in remarks cited by CBS News Texas that the city has already suffered economic losses during the closure period.

"Since we closed the convention center in 2025, we've lost 3,000 associated jobs from not having a fully functioning [convention center]," said Davis.

The Visit Dallas leader cautioned that further delays would intensify economic and reputational impacts during the closure, which was already expected to go through 2029.

"Then any potential delay past that is going to get exponentially worse," Davis added. "There's reputational damage that's taking place because we've moved groups that we had promised."

Originally opened in 1973, the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center has long been considered outdated compared with newer facilities in competing cities. The latest action allows the project to proceed under its current framework as detailed engineering and phased construction continue.

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

usaenews.com

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NEWS

Maui County Creates Two New Hotel Zoning Districts

By Jordan Bradley

The Maui County Council approved a bill that would create two new hotel zoning districts in South and West Maui.

The new measure, dubbed Bill 88, was approved by a 7-2 vote at a June 19 Maui County council meeting despite the prior recommendations to deny the bill from three separate planning commissions. The measure now goes to Maui County Mayor Richard Bissen, who is expected to approve it.

If approved by Bissen, Bill 88 would establish H-3 and H-4 hotel districts in Maui county code to effectively replace apartment zones A-1 and A-2. The apartment zones, established by Bill 9 in 2025 to increase housing on the island, addressed a swath of transient vacation rentals (TVRs) that had been operating within South and West Maui residential buildings.

Bill 9 requires TVRs in apartment zones A-1 and A-2 to stop operating by January 1, 2029. Bill 88 would

allow the affected TVRs to apply for a hotel rezoning permit to continue operating.

Bill 88 follows the recommendation of the county's Housing and Land Use Committee (HLUC), and is supported by the Maui Vacation Rental Association and the Realtors Association of Maui. The measure received unanimous opposition from the Maui, Moloka'i and Lāna'i County Planning Commissions.

If enacted, Bill 88 would allow for approximately 4,500 vacation rentals operating out of 104 apartment-zoned buildings to apply for the new zoning designation, according to local outlet Maui Now.

The bill was introduced by HLUC Chair Nohelani U'u-Hodgins. In the June 19 meeting, she emphasized that Bill 88 does not automatically rezone established properties, it only opens a pathway forward for hotel zoning.

Earlier in the meeting, a representative from the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA) shared testimony in opposition of Bill 88's passage, urging

the council to defer the vote.

"OHA supported Bill 9 because it restored apartment zone lands to their residential purpose and advanced Maui's ability to address severe housing pressures affecting residents and Native Hawaiian beneficiaries," said OHA representative McKenna Woodward. "Bill 88 would undermine that policy choice by creating new H-3 and H-4 hotel districts as a pathway for continued transient vacation rental use on lands Bill 9 recently returned to residential use."

Woodward said OHA is advocating for Maui County to conduct studies on housing stability, sea level rise exposure, infrastructure capacity and community impacts of the two proposed hotel districts. She also said each property "should be evaluated individually."

She went on to cite a University of Hawai'i Economic Research Organization study that found that 85% of affected apartment TVR owners "have out of state mailing addresses" and that most direct local owner impact

falls on roughly 450 permanent Maui residents.

Council Member Keani Rawlins-Fernandez and Council Member Gabe Johnson cast the two dissenting votes against the bill. According to Maui Now, the pair are the only council members not up for reelection this year.

Rawlins-Fernandez said in testimony ahead of the council's vote on Bill 88 that she and community organizations like OHA are advocating "to put in safeguards—more safeguards than were put into Bill 88."

She added that "community members who fought for reclaiming housing for our residents were not here, but the lobbyists sure were, and the condo owners, those that you know are profiting off of our home."

At the June 19 meeting, Tom Victorine, a condo owner and president of the board of directors of a condominium complex impacted by Bill 9, gave testimony in support of Bill 88, adding that the standard rezoning process should be streamlined.

Hilton Partners with Big Brothers Big Sisters Makes 'Largest-Ever' Charitable Points Donation

By Jordan Bradley

Hilton is partnering with Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) to bring mentorship and opportunities to explore career paths in hospitality at hotels to local youth and young adults in cities around the country.

Local middle and high school Littles—the term BBBSA uses to refer to its program participants—in Anaheim, California; Atlanta, Georgia; Dallas, Texas; Columbus, Ohio; Miami, Florida; and Washington, D.C., will receive monthly on-property mentoring with Hilton team members and will participate in curated skill-building experiences that focus on workplace readiness, communication and professionalism throughout the 2026–2027 school year.

In addition, Big Brothers Big Sisters participants between ages 16–25 can receive mentorship and exposure to professional settings through the partnership. They "will engage in a structured development experience across Hilton properties and corporate locations designed to build mentorship relationships, strengthen professional skills and provide immersive career exposure," Hilton said.

To coincide with the partnership, Hilton—through its Hilton Global Foundation—also donated 250 million Hilton Honors Points to the nonprofit "to create transformative travel ex-

periences for Big Brothers Big Sisters' Littles and their families," Hilton said.

BBBSA was established in 1904 by Ernest Coulter, a New York City court clerk, as an alternative to the juvenile justice system, according to the official BBBSA webpage. Coulter recruited 39 volunteers to act as mentors for young boys. The same year and in the same city, Ladies of Charity also began mentoring girls entering the New York Children's Court. In 1912, Coulter's program had expanded to 26 cities, and by 1914, the two organizations were making plans to create one national organization.

"For 120 years, Big Brothers Big Sisters has seen the impact when a positive adult empowers a young person and opens doors they never knew existed," said Artis Stevens, President and CEO of BBBSA. "Hilton shares our belief that every young person deserves the chance to realize their potential, and through our partnership, we're meeting them where they are and connecting them to meaningful careers by providing career exposure, skills training and onramps to meaningful employment."

At Hilton, 63% of leadership roles are filled by people who got their first jobs at the company, and the company can boast a lower-than-industry-average turnover rate. These data points illustrate the potential opportunities available to young professionals seek-

ing career paths.

"At Hilton, we know hospitality is a powerful engine for opportunity; a first step on the career ladder helps open doors to meaningful careers, economic mobility and life-changing success," said Katherine Lugar, EVP of Corporate Affairs at Hilton and President of the Hilton Global Foundation. "Through this partnership with Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, our team members will help young people see what's possible through hospitality—connecting them with mentors, real-world career exposure and the tools and travel experiences to build confidence and strengthen their skills—inspiring and expanding their horizons along the way."

To support the announcement of the partnership with BBBSA, Hilton shared two stories of Hilton employees mentoring through the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. In one video, Robert and Nate at the DoubleTree by Hilton Grand Hotel Biscayne Bay in Florida share how Robert's mentorship of Nate through the BBBSA program led to Nate beginning his career in hospitality at the same hotel. In the second video, Evita, the director of marketing at the Signia by Hilton Atlanta Georgia World Congress Center, and her Little, Shaniya, share how the mentorship has grown into an authentic, "two-way connection," Hilton said.

Find the videos and more information about the partnership [here](#).



Big Brothers Big Sisters participants pose for a selfie at the Signia by Hilton Atlanta Georgia World Congress Center.

Industry Movers



Chef Vannesa Bordoy has been named Executive Chef of Dolly Parton's SongTeller Hotel in Nashville. Most recently serving as Executive Chef of the Graduate Hotel's White Limozeen in Nashville, she previously held roles as executive sous chef and sous chef. During her tenure, she oversaw full restaurant operations, including menu development, inventory and cost control, and quality assurance. She has also led large-scale banquet and event production.



Chris Saputo has joined the El Encanto, Santa Barbara as General Manager. He brings more than 20 years of hospitality experience to the role. He entered the industry at 15 as a bellman and built experience across nearly every area of hotel operations. His career has included work with Waldorf Astoria, Four Seasons, and Rosewood, along with independent operations including Pelican Hill and Ojai Valley Inn.



Chef Joseph Mills is the new Executive Chef of Sheraton San Diego Resort. Mills brings more than 25 years of culinary leadership. He joins Sheraton San Diego Resort from his most recent role as executive sous chef of San Diego's Hotel Del Coronado. He previously held the position of executive chef of The Westin Bonaventure Hotel & Suites Los Angeles. Mills trained at Portland's Western Culinary Institute.



Maj. Gen. David Hill, PMP, USA (Ret.), has been named Executive Director of the Society of American Military Engineers. He also serves as Executive Director of the SAME Foundation. Hill comes to SAME with more than three decades of experience as a leader within the Army, serving most recently as Commandant of the Army War College (2021–2025), where he led the Army's senior professional military education institution.

[See More Industry Movers](#)

Sharon Wyman

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has always been more than a workplace to me, it has been a mission, a team, and a community," she said. "I am grateful to the Board of Directors for their confidence and look forward to continuing my work alongside our exceptional staff, partners, and

stakeholders as we further build on our successes and advance Suffolk County and the greater Long Island region as a world-class destination."

Discover Long Island Chair Marc Weinstein said Wyman's experience and institutional knowledge made her the unanimous choice of the board.

"Sharon's journey is a testament to her dedication, professionalism, and

commitment to Discover Long Island's mission," Weinstein said. "She has helped shape this organization from the inside out, earning the respect of our staff, Board, partners, and tourism community along the way. Following an extensive search process, the Board unanimously agreed that Sharon's experience, vision, and institutional knowledge make her uniquely qualified to lead Discover Long Island into its next chapter."

Weinstein also thanked Pally for his service as interim chief executive during the transition period. Pally praised Wyman's leadership and preparation for the role.

"She embodies the very best of this organization and the Board's decision reflects what so many of us already know, that Sharon is exceptionally prepared to lead Discover

Long Island forward and continue building on its remarkable momentum," Pally said.

Wyman holds the CDME designation and has also received recognition from several regional organizations, including *Long Island Press*, *Long Island Business News*, *City & State* and *Blank Slate Media*.

"As we look ahead, my immediate focus in this new role will be on strengthening partnerships, advancing our destination stewardship efforts, and growing Long Island's visitor economy, while ensuring tourism continues to be a powerful economic driver for Suffolk County and our communities," Wyman said. "I am excited to build upon the strong foundation already in place and continue showcasing everything that makes Long Island a destination unlike any other."

Elke Geraerts

continued from page 3

practical strategies that improve performance, resilience, and decision-making.

PCMA said the event's program is built around three themes—Conne-

tion, Integrity, and Future—but added this year's agenda signals a shift: less inspiration, more application. The focus is on equipping leaders with tools they can use immediately to navigate complexity and deliver measurable impact.

Find more information [here](#).



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NEWS

Getting to Know Gregory Heidrich, Samuel B. Shapiro Award Honoree

By Todd McElwee

Gregory Heidrich, NACD-DC, the recently retired CEO of the Society of Actuaries (SOA), was honored with the Samuel B. Shapiro Award for Chief Staff Executive Achievement—powered by Atlanta CVB—at Association Forum's Honors Gala on June 25 at The Old Post Office in Chicago. Before receiving Association Forum's highest honor, he shared a bit of information about himself with USAE.

Heidrich has been married to his wife Alyssa for more than 41 years. They have three children, one of whom works in the association industry for the American Academy of Pediatrics, and three grandchildren.

He graduated from the University

of Oklahoma (Highest Honors) with a BA in Economics and holds an MA in Economics from the University of Chicago.

Heidrich became a Forum member in 2007 when he joined the Society of Actuaries. "It was a critically important step as I moved from working for trade associations to a professional society," he said.

Asked how Association Forum has shaped his career, Heidrich said: "The Forum gave me direct access to a network of peer CEOs in the Chicago market running other major associations here. The contacts and network it

provided gave me CEO colleagues who have provided advice, guidance, peer support, and friendship throughout my time leading the SOA. They showed

me best practices, told me when I was making a mistake, provided support through difficult challenges, and celebrated my successes with me. They were essential to my being able to do the work I've done."

Heidrich became involved in the association industry through a summer job. He said: "While in graduate school working on a PhD in Economics at the University of Chicago, I took a summer job doing economic analysis for the Alliance of American Insurers, a trade association representing the US property-casualty insurance industry. I loved it! A lot more than going to school, as it turned out, since I was applying directly much of the work I'd studied in the renowned Law and Economics program at Chicago. A year later after completing my Master's degree, I left academia and joined the Alliance fulltime as a Staff Economist, moving later to Director of Research, and a Senior Vice President/CFO before becoming CEO of the Society of Actuaries."

USAE asked Heidrich to share something about him most would not know. "I love wilderness canoeing and camping," he said. "While in college, I



guided canoe trips for the Boy Scouts National High Adventure Base in the Boundary Waters Wilderness Canoe Area in Northern Minnesota and in the Quetico Provincial Park in southern Ontario. While I left canoeing behind while building my career and helping raise our family, for the last five years, I've returned to it and have guided family groups each summer into the same, unchanging wilderness. It feeds my soul!"

Mardeen Mattix Tapped to Lead San Diego Convention Center Corp.

By Jonathan Trager

The San Diego Convention Center Corp. (SDCCC) has appointed Mardeen Mattix as its next President & CEO, selecting a veteran internal leader to guide one of the region's most significant economic drivers through a period of growth and modernization.

The SDCCC Board of Directors announced Mattix's appointment on June 24 following a national search. She succeeds Clifford "Rip" Rippetoe, who's retiring after a decade in the role.

Mattix expressed gratitude for the decision and said she's eager to build on the organization's momentum.

"I am honored by the board's confidence and excited for the opportunity to lead this remarkable organization and team," Mattix said. "For nearly 28 years, I have had the privilege of working alongside dedicated employees, industry partners, clients, community leaders, and Board Members who share a commitment to San Diego's success."

Mattix most recently served as deputy CEO and CFO. She joined the convention center in 1998 and has worked in a variety of leadership roles spanning event management, sales, accounting, finance, and administration.

SDCCC Chair Will Rodriguez-Kennedy said Mattix's experience and leadership made her the top choice among candidates who were considered.



"Mardeen's depth of experience, strategic mindset, and demonstrated leadership in our organization and community made her the clear choice to lead us forward," Rodriguez-Kennedy said. "She has played a critical role in the Convention Center's success for nearly three decades, and we are confident in her ability to lead with clarity, stability, and vision for years to come."

The appointment comes as the waterfront convention center prepares for major capital improvements and infrastructure upgrades designed to enhance the guest experience and maintain the facility's competitiveness.

Mattix holds a degree in accounting from Western Washington University and has received recognition for her financial leadership and contributions to the tourism and hospitality industry.

Fargo Officials Select Site for New Convention Center

By Jonathan Trager

Advancing a major redevelopment project, the Fargo City Commission in North Dakota has approved the Fargo Civic Center site as the location for a new downtown convention center.

Commissioners voted 4-1 on June 22 to move forward with plans to redevelop the existing Civic Center property, selecting it over a competing proposal after months of evaluation and public debate.

Mayor Tim Mahoney, who had earlier called the project a "long-sought-after decision," said the effort reflects both planning complexity and community investment in the outcome.

The decision follows a competitive selection process that ranked multiple potential sites. The Civic Center, built in 1960, has hosted concerts, civic events, and community gatherings for decades but is now considered outdated and in need of significant upgrades or replacement.

City officials said the project is intended to strengthen downtown Fargo as an economic and cultural hub by linking the new convention

center with surrounding infrastructure, including hotels, parking facilities, and pedestrian connections.

Rocky Schneider, Executive Director of Downtown Community Partnership, described the broader vision for downtown redevelopment in supportive remarks about the project's potential impact.

"This really turns this sort of dark spot in downtown to a very active center again," Schneider said. "It's the Civic Plaza where the community is supposed to come together."

The redevelopment connects multiple civic assets in a concentrated area, Schneider added.

"It almost finalizes now with the library and the City Hall and the convention center all in the same spot," Schneider said. "It's amazing to see what Second Avenue to Broadway Square down to the riverfront can become."

The project is structured as a public-private partnership, with the city financing the convention center itself while private developers fund adjacent elements such as hotel and mixed-use development. Construction could begin as early as this year, with completion currently projected for 2029.

Scene at Association Forum's Honors Gala



NEWS

Around Associations

GBTA Research Finds Business Travel Generated \$623.8 Billion...

Business travel within and to the United States generated \$623.8 billion in total gross domestic product (GDP), and related travel spending reached \$538.5 billion in 2024, according to a new study released this month by the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA).

Based on analysis of 2024 data, the report reveals the impact of business travel across industries, employment, public finances and regional economies across all 50 states, including accounting for 2.1% of the entire U.S. economy (GDP) and \$148.6 billion in U.S. tax revenue. It supports 6.7 million jobs nationwide and is linked to 1 in every 24 U.S. jobs. Nearly 488 million business trips were taken across the United States in 2024.

"Business travel delivers value that reaches well beyond companies and travelers—it's also about direct economic impact in communities across the country," said Suzanne Neufang, CEO of GBTA. "From supporting millions of jobs to funding public services, the data shows how deeply business travel is connected to U.S. economic resilience, growth and competitiveness."

The GBTA U.S. Economic Impact

study was conducted by Rockport Analytics.

Find more information [here](#).

NBAA Offers FIFA World Cup Guidance...

The National Business Aviation Association (NBAA) has shared that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has detailed plans in place for effectively managing air traffic during scheduled FIFA World Cup matches taking place in the United States, Canada and Mexico from June 11 to July 19.

The association added that if business takes one to a host cities, operators should conduct due diligence regarding planning procedures, as flight activity is expected to increase across those regions.

Find more information [here](#).

Registration Open for UFI's Global Congress in Bahrain...

UFI, The Global Association of the Exhibition Industry, has opened registration for the 93rd UFI Global Congress, which will take place from November 2–5 in the Kingdom of Bahrain. It is hosted by Exhibition World Bahrain and the Bahrain Tourism and Exhibitions Authority (BTEA).

Sara Ahmed Buhiji, CEO of Bahrain

Tourism and Exhibitions Authority (BTEA) and Chairperson of Exhibition World Bahrain (EWB) said: "We look forward to hosting the UFI Global Congress in Bahrain for the first time and welcoming UFI delegates to the Kingdom. This reflects Bahrain's continued commitment to the global exhibitions and business events industry, and our focus on delivering an exceptional congress at Exhibition World Bahrain."

UFI Leadership has been monitoring the situation in the Middle East for some time. Following a thorough review at its executive committee and board meetings earlier this month, and in line with UFI's purpose to unite

our community, the association said it is "delighted" to launch the Global Congress.

"Each year, the UFI Global Congress brings together the people and ideas that are shaping the future of our industry," said Chris Skeith OBE, CEO and Managing Director of UFI.

Find more information [here](#).

MPI Tennessee's Swing into Summer FUNdraiser Coming Next Month...

On July 23, MPI Tennessee Chapter's Swing into Summer FUNdraiser will be held at Nashville's Five Iron Golf.

Find more information [here](#).

Hotels World Cup

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years now, but what we've done is we purchased and implemented the use of additional relay devices for a lot of our frontline staff—our front desk, some of the people in our food and beverage outlets—so that we can communicate."

Now that the matches are here, the energy in host city hotels is electric, infectious, and brings a feeling of community.

"We knew that we were about to welcome a world of people that were just very, very rabid, excited football fans," Holcumbink said. "I think what has maybe pleasantly surprised us a little bit is just how many of these folks are so eager to experience it, to

learn about our culture, our food, and what the Midwest is all about while they're enthusiastically cheering on their team."

Not just their team, he said, but about the game of football itself.

"What we've seen through the first two matches already is so many of our guests here in the hotel pause and take the time to watch any game that's being televised," Holcumbink said.

For the Four Seasons' Samara who grew up watching the game and the World Cup, she told *USAE* that recognizes that Philly—as sports-oriented as it is—doesn't necessarily lean into soccer on an average day, "so to see Philadelphia fans, the community embracing these international sport of soccer is special for me, personally."



Artesha Moore, FASAE, CAE, President & CEO, Association Forum, speaks at Association Forum's Honors Gala on June 25 at The Old Post Office in Chicago.

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