



Lisa Vanderpump, a long-time partner of Caesars Entertainment and restaurateur, cuts the ribbon at the July 6 grand opening celebration at Caesars Republic Lake Tahoe Hotel & Casino in Nevada.

EIC Announces 2026 Hall of Leaders Honorees

By Todd McElwee

A quintet of heralded professionals are being inducted into the Events Industry Council's (EIC) Hall of Leaders (HOL).

Elliott L. Ferguson II, President & CEO, Destination DC; Robert Priest-Heck, Retired CEO, Freeman; David Kliman, CMM, Co-founder ELX and Owner, The Kliman Group; Kit Lykkeitof, Director of Convention, Wonderful Copenhagen; Weemin Ong, CEM, CMP, Vice President of Sales & MICE, Marina Bay Sands; and Annamaria Ruffini, CIS, CITP, CMP, President & CEO, Events In & Out, will be honored in Las Vegas on October 12 during an event hosted by MGM Resorts International.

"Through the EIC Global Awards, we recognize the leaders and innovators propelling the international events industry forward," said Amy Calvert, President & CEO, EIC. "This year's Hall of Leader inductees and award recipients reflect the rich diversity of talent defining our global community, uniting legendary leaders who anchored our industry's legacy with dynamic new voices driving its future. Ultimately, these awards remind us that business events are a powerful catalyst for human connection, community resili-

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Two Midtown NYC Hotels Temporarily Close

Precaution Related to Nearby Construction Activity

By Jordan Bradley

At least two hotels within sharing a block with a Manhattan skyscraper under construction were forced to evacuate guests when it was discovered on July 7 that structural elements in the building were failing.

The Westin Grand New York Central sits across from the former Pfizer headquarters on E 43rd Street

while the Hampton Inn Manhattan Grand Central sits across E 42nd Street—both sharing a city block with the skyscraper.

The building is currently being converted from office space into apartments. According to local officials, a safety manager reported a compromised steel beam on the 21st floor early in the morning of July 7, the *New York Times* reported.

Upon arrival, NYC Fire Department officials discovered that two support beams had buckled and several floors were sagging, leading to an evacuation that impacted the skyscraper and several of its neighboring buildings.

Barricades and blockades were installed by NYC police officers in the surrounding blocks to create a "frozen

HFTP and Destination AI Partner on Hospitality Education Initiative

By Jordan Bradley

Hospitality leaders seeking to understand the implications of artificial intelligence on their businesses will soon have a new education resource.

The Hospitality Financial and Technology Professionals (HFTP) association on July 5 announced a new collaboration with Destination AI, the annual conference on artificial intelligence and new tech-

nology implementations in hospitality, to bring professionals insights and education on business uses for AI within the industry.

The collaboration between the trade association and the annual summit will grow the Destination AI event to include year-round education, industry insights and programming designed "to help hospitality leaders stay ahead of the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence."

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Business, So Why Do Tourism
Bureaus Pay for It Alone?

Meet Minneapolis Hosting Event at Obama Presidential Center

*First DMO to Book There
Since Grand Opening*

By Todd McElwee

Meet Minneapolis was looking for the right place to share an impactful story. The group found it at the Obama Presidential Center.

The Obama Presidential Center's Grand Opening Weekend was June 19 – 21.

Meet Minneapolis will be first DMO to hold a client event at the Chicago facility

since the opening when it hosts "The Power of Place: Minneapolis Shapes the Story" on July 14.

Choose Chicago took a client FAM there for a reception in May. Choose Chicago took a client FAM there for a reception in May.

"Being the first destination marketing organization

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A new level of *possibility* in Miami



The Future of the Miami Beach Convention Center Campus

In Fall 2027, the Miami Beach Convention Center campus will welcome an 800-room Grand Hyatt headquarter hotel — directly connected and purpose-built for high-performing citywide conventions.

MiamiMeetings.com

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HOTS

HOTS Row, Row, Row Your Boat... Kelsey Pfendler became the first American woman to row across the mid-Pacific from California to Hawaii solo on July 3, the Associated Press reports. Pfendler is a Grand Canyon river rafting guide who spent 43 days at sea, rowing her 21-foot row boat from Monterey, California, to Honolulu, Hawaii, arriving at the Ala Wai Boat Harbor. Pfendler was greeted by hundreds of spectators, according to local news outlet Hawaii News Now. Pfendler's sea trek broke both the previous record held by a woman and by a man—86 days, and 52 days, respectively. In a Spotfund campaign

set up for the row to benefit the Whale Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to support the mental, fiscal and physical wellbeing of the Grand Canyon river guiding community. Pfendler said she had taken on the challenge to encourage women everywhere to recognize and embrace their strength. HOTS wonders what new record Pfendler will set sail on next—after an ocean-sized meal and a good night's sleep, of course!

✱ ✱ ✱ ✱

HOTS Christmas in July... The Danish city of Aalborg hosted its annual World Santa Claus Congress in early July. The gathering is a decades-long midsummer tradition inviting Santas, Mrs. Clauses and elves from around the world to gather and share tips on reindeer handling and favorite beard oil recipes. Though it has evolved into a four-day Santa convention, it started as a simple gathering to entertain children in 1957. In an interview with the Associated Press, 64-year-old Robert Hercz said all Santas share "a gene"

that predisposes them to generosity and spreading good cheer. "You have it or you don't," Hercz told the outlet. "We have the true Santa spirit. And it's all about giving, sharing, and putting a little bit of joy in people's hearts." Apparently, the gathering has no age limit for Santas, as a 33-year-old Danish Santa, Simon Brons, told AP that "Christmas is not a season. It's a feeling you have in your stomach. So if you want, you can have Christmas the whole year." HOTS hopes these Santas enjoy the scene their presents Claus-ed!

Meet Minneapolis

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to host a client event at the Obama Presidential Center, since the official opening, is both an honor and a privilege," Melvin Tennant, CAE, President & CEO, Meet Minneapolis, told *USAE*. "It's a unique opportunity to welcome our Chicagoland clients and supporters to our nation's newest presidential landmark, while strengthening relationships in one of our key sales markets."

He continued: "Places matter because they tell stories. That's true of Minneapolis, and it's true of the Obama Presidential Center. Bringing our clients together in a space dedicated to leadership, community and civic engagement creates a meaningful setting to talk about how destinations shape experiences and why Minneapolis continues to stand out as a place where people come together."

Tennant credited Rosalind Dixon, the bureau's Chicago-based Associate Director of Business Development, for recognizing the opportunity to create a truly memorable experience for clients in one of Minneapolis' most important sales markets. The museum, including the full-sized replica of the oval office, will be

open for guests, with the evening featuring a story-driven program in the facility's Sky Room and networking.

"We chose the Obama Presidential Center because it perfectly complemented the theme of our event, 'The Power of Place: Minneapolis Shapes the Story,'" said Tennant. "Great destinations create lasting impressions, and the places where people gather become part of the experience itself. The recently opened Obama Presidential Center offers our guests the opportunity to experience an extraordinary venue while also sparking a broader conversation about how meaningful places shape meetings, events and communities."

Tennant added: "Rather than simply hosting another client reception, we want to create an experience that reflects the same values we share with meeting planners: that the right place can inspire new ideas, strengthen connections and leave a lasting impression."

Save for no photography in certain spaces, holding an event at the Obama Presidential Center has been similar to other venues, the bureau said. The biggest challenge was planning an event in a venue that was still under construction.

"Additionally, one consideration for us throughout the planning has been honoring the significance of the space," Tennant said. "It's not just a beautiful or convenient space to hold



Melvin Tennant

an event—it's a place that has mission, meaning and tells a story. Our Meet Minneapolis team was intentional in designing our event in a way that complements the deep meaning of the Center. We want to encourage our attendees to engage with the ideas it represents and what Power of Place really means."

Asked by *USAE* what he hoped attendees take from the evening, Tennant said he hopes they leave "with a deeper understanding of Minneapolis and the people who make our city such a remarkable place to gather."



Obama Presidential Center

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NEWS

W South Beach to Become Hilton-Managed Waldorf Astoria

By Jordan Bradley

The owners of the W South Beach in Miami Beach, Florida, have signed a management agreement with Hilton to transform the property into the Waldorf Astoria Miami Beach.

The hotel, owned by British investment firm Reuben Brothers, is preparing to shutter its doors on August 19 for renovations beginning the next day, simultaneously laying off more than 300 employees. Earlier this summer, the Rueben Brothers filed a Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) Act notice, wherein they said the property would not be under Marriott International management upon its reopening.

At the time, the Reuben Brothers said they did not have a new management company lined up.

Hilton officials announced on July 7 the hotel's new management agreement and branding, marking the first Waldorf Astoria property in the

Florida market.

The forthcoming Waldorf Astoria Miami Beach "will undergo a meticulous renovation and repositioning ahead of its Winter 2027 planned relaunch, at which time it will be managed by Hilton," the hotel company said.

The hotel is located on the historic oceanfront street of Collins Avenue, and renovations will need to be approved by the local planning commission and the Miami Beach Historic Preservation Board.

The Reuben Brothers earlier this year received certificates of appropriateness from the local historic preservation board for most of the changes, but local officials pushed back on a proposed members only club complete with a private entrance and proposed structural changes that were meant to make way for a potential French bakery.

According to Hilton, planned renovations do not include those chang-



Rendering of the entrance of the Waldorf Astoria Miami Beach

es, but do include 348 refreshed and spacious suites; a renovated lobby and ground floor gathering space, Peacock Alley; a new food and beverage program; "a newly curated spa and wellness experience" with an

upgraded fitness center; renovated pool deck, including the addition of private cabanas; and renovated event spaces.

"Miami Beach is one of those rare

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Hall of Leaders

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ience, and global innovation."

Ferguson has been in his current role since 2009. He was U.S. Travel's National Chair in 2019–2020, and prior to Destination DC, was vice president of sales at the Atlanta CVB. He's served with Brand USA, is in U.S. Travel's Hall of Leaders, and was in the Air Force National Guard from 1985–1992.

A meetings industry leader for more than three decades, Priest-Heck spent 14 years at Freeman, before retiring in 2024. In 2025, IAEE honored him with its Lifetime Achievement Award, which highlights a member who has changed the direction of the industry and made a significant impact on how it operates. He works with San Diego State University L. Robert Payne School of Hospitality and Tourism Management and is on the board at PRA.

Kliman has been recognized with the Paul Flackett IMEX Academy Award Winner and MPI's International Meeting Planner of the Year honor. He is the co-founder of the Event Leaders Exchange (ELX) and worked closely with EIC on COVID recovery efforts. He founded the Kliman Group, whose offerings include communications consulting, in 2002.

Lykketoft is a green leader within hospitality. She's been at Wonderful Copenhagen for nine years, has been active with PCMA, was Best Cities Global Alliance's Chair and participated with Sport Event Denmark.

Currently, she is serving on the Convene4Climate C4C Advisory Board.

Ong's HSMIA Asia Pacific profile notes service with PCMA's Board of Directors roughly a decade ago. It added he was the Asian meeting professional to be appointed. Prior to joining Marina Bay Sands in 2012, Wee Min was the chief commercial officer at Suntec Singapore. He has been active in the Singapore Association of Convention & Exhibition Organizers & Suppliers (SACEOS).

Ruffini started her firm in 2003, which she said has allowed her to express her knowledge and work skills to the fullest and, at the same time, to work professionally within the international scenario of incentive travel and events. In 2018, she was elected President of SITE.

EIC also announced Pacesetter Award, Social Impact and Award Adaptation and Innovation Award recipients.

The Pacesetter Award recognizes emerging leaders with a proven track record of successful leadership and who are making an impact on advancing the industry. James Filtz, CMP, CPCE, CHE, Sr. Principal Solutions Consultant, Cvent, and Evan Nielson, CMP, Sr. Event Manager, AARP, are the honorees.

The Social Impact Award highlights extraordinary effort on the part of an individual and or organization in the areas of people, planet, and prosperity



The 2026 EIC Hall of Leaders are Elliott L. Ferguson II, President & CEO, Destination DC; Robert Priest-Heck, Retired CEO, Freeman; David Kliman, CMM, Co-founder ELX and Owner, The Kliman Group; Kit Lykketoft, Director of Convention, Wonderful Copenhagen; Weemin Ong, CEM, CMP, Vice President of Sales & MICE, Marina Bay Sands; and Annamaria Ruffini, CIS, CITP, CMP, President & CEO, Events In & Out." They will be honored in Las Vegas on October 12 during an event hosted by MGM Resorts International.

aligned with UN SDGs. Anna Abdelnoor, CEO and Founder, ISLA, and Alisson Batres, CEO, Organización, S.A.

The Adaptation and Innovation Award honors extraordinary effort on the part of an individual or organization in the areas of adaptation and innovation to ensure the industry's relevance now and into the future. Chin-Hsun (Ken) Tsai, Ph.D., Associate Professor: Program Director of Event Management Program, Iowa State University, is the recipient.

"The strength of the business events industry is built upon the passion, ideas, dedication and innovation of so many professionals," said EIC Board Chair and President of Incentive Research Foundation Stephanie Harris. "The EIC Global Awards provide us with an opportunity to shine a light on the exceptional people and organiza-

tions that are making a lasting impact through their leadership while inspiring us as we look toward the future."

"MGM Resorts is honored to host the EIC Global Awards once again in Las Vegas and to welcome our global business events community for this important celebration," said Stephanie Glanzer, CMP, Chief Sales Officer and Sr. Vice President at MGM Resorts International. "This year's recipients represent the very best of our industry, leaders and organizations whose vision, service and commitment continue to shape how we gather, connect and create meaningful impact. At its heart, this celebration is a reminder of what makes business events so powerful: the ability to bring people together, strengthen relationships and inspire progress that extends far beyond the event itself."

Industry Movers



Michael Robinson is now General Manager of The Valorian Los Angeles, Curio Collection by Hilton. Robinson brings two decades of hospitality leadership experience spanning both metropolitan and beach resort markets both domestically and internationally. He has spent the past 18 years rising through the ranks at Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants. Most recently, Robinson served as the pre-opening and opening general manager of the global flagship Kimpton Hong Kong.



Emily Gjothlen has been named Director of Catering at Roanoke Hospitality, a Chicago-based restaurant group. She will lead catering sales and event strategy across Roanoke Hospitality's portfolio and joins the firm from The Langham Chicago, where she most recently served as the catering sales manager. Prior to that role, she served as food and beverage manager at The Langham Chicago. She graduated from Kendall College in Chicago.



Paul Fitzgerald has been named General Manager of Hilton Alexandria Old Town in Alexandria, Virginia. Fitzgerald brings more than a decade of leadership experience across several Hilton properties. He most recently served as hotel manager at the 757-room Hilton Baltimore Inner Harbor. His Hilton tenure includes food and beverage leadership roles at Hilton Boston Logan Airport, the former Madison Washington DC, A Hilton Hotel, and Washington Hilton.



Carly Reynolds has joined the Atlanta CVB (ACVB) as a citywide sales executive. In this role, she will sell and market Atlanta as a premier destination for trade shows and group meetings, utilizing at least 1,000 rooms on peak nights. She brings more than a decade of hospitality sales experience to ACVB. Most recently, she was director of national accounts at Omni Atlanta Hotel at Centennial Park.

[See More Industry Movers](#)

Steve Walsh Named Head of American Hospital Association

By Todd McElwee

Steve Walsh, a longtime healthcare executive and former Massachusetts politician, has been appointed President & CEO of the American Hospital Association (AHA).

Walsh has served as President & CEO of the Massachusetts Health & Hospital Association (MHA) since

2017 and will take the reins of AHA in the fall. He succeeds Rick Pollack, who had announced his plans to retire by the end of 2026.

"It is a profound honor to be selected to lead the American Hospital Association, and I am grateful for the trust the Board has placed in me to carry on the legacy of service that Rick Pollack has created," said Walsh. "The next era of

American healthcare is bright for the patients and caregivers we serve, all of whom will benefit from our members' unified focus around access, quality and innovation."

Walsh brings more than two decades of experience in healthcare. As President & CEO of MHA, he has been a proven coalition builder and has broken boundaries between providers, payers, policymakers and others, AHA said. He has championed the belief that strong hospitals mean stronger communities—creating a more accessible and coordinated healthcare system for patients on behalf of more than 70 hospital and health system members, AHA added.

Before MHA, Walsh served six terms in the Massachusetts House of Representatives, including as Chair of the House Committee on Health Care Financing. In 2011, he wrote and oversaw the passage of Chapter 224, the commonwealth's 2012 healthcare reform law, which incentivized alternative payment methodologies and investment in community health while encouraging patient empowerment and primary care.

Walsh is a member of the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE) and has been named to *Boston Magazine's* list of Most Influential Bostonians and *Modern Healthcare's* 300 Most Influential People in Healthcare. He's a graduate of Wesleyan University, New England School of Law, and the Harvard Kennedy School of Government.



Steve Walsh

"Steve is a proven healthcare leader, innovator and accomplished advocate for healthcare improvement, who understands both the challenges facing hospitals and the opportunities ahead," said Marc L. Boom, M.D., Chair of the AHA Board of Trustees and President & CEO of Houston Methodist. "Throughout his career, he has demonstrated an ability to bring people together, build consensus and advance meaningful solutions on behalf of patients, caregivers and communities."

Boom also praised outgoing AHA President & CEO Rick Pollack.

"On behalf of the Board of Trustees, I want to thank Rick for his extraordinary leadership and decades of service to the Association and our nation's hospitals," Boom said. "We are deeply grateful for his contributions and excited for the future under Steve's leadership."

New Orleans Convention Center Receives Top Workplace Recognition

By Jonathan Trager

The New Orleans Ernest N. Morial Convention Center (MCCNO) has been named a regional Top Workplace for the 11th time, adding another employee-driven recognition to a year that has already brought national honors for the state's largest convention facility.

The recognition, announced on July 5, was awarded through the annual Top Workplaces program sponsored by the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* and the *New Orleans Advocate*. The convention center ranked third in the Large Business category, with winners selected based entirely on confidential employee surveys conducted by workplace research firm Energage. The surveys measure factors including leadership, workplace culture, employee engagement, and organizational alignment.

The latest honor follows the convention center's third National Top Workplaces USA award earlier this year, reinforcing its emphasis on employee development and workplace culture.

"Our team is the foundation of our success, and we are committed to creating a workplace where employees have the tools, resources and opportunities to be their best selves," said MCCNO President & CEO Jim Cook. "When our employees succeed, our clients, guests and community benefit."

The convention center employs nearly 450 people across departments that include operations, guest services, sales, finance, security, and human resources. Officials said the organization invests in leadership training, professional certifications, career development, and employee

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NEWS

NYC Mayor, Others Join Hotel Picket Lines *Hotels Striking to Join Local Union*

By Jordan Bradley

Strikes at two non-union hotels in New York's Times Square neighborhood have been ongoing since late June, garnering support from local and state elected officials, other trade groups and neighboring hotel workers.

Workers at the Fairfield Inn & Suites by Marriott New York Manhattan Times Square and the Four Points by Sheraton Midtown have been holding strikes since June 29—through the holiday weekend—in an effort to move along stalled contract negotiations between the Hotel & Gaming Trades Council (HTC) and hotel management.



NYC Mayor Zohran Mamdani speaks to striking hotel workers in Times Square on July 1.

According to the union, workers at both of the hotels voted to become members of HTC in October 2022.

"Throughout years of negotiations for their first union contract, the union has filed multiple charges accusing the hotel of committing unfair labor practices—including failing to bargain in good faith, discriminating against workers because of their support for the union, encouraging workers to get rid of the union, replacing union positions with subcontracted workers, and more," HTC said.

In a June 29 filing with the National Labor Relations Board, HTC accused Gehr Hospitality New York Management, LLC—which operates both the Fairfield and Four Points hotels—of refusal to bargain/bad faith bargaining and coercive statements.

USAE reached out to Gehr Hospitality representatives to inquire about the length of the contract negotiations and the allegations made by HTC, but did not receive comment by press deadline.

Workers at the two hotels are still not unionized. They are seeking to join the union to earn higher wages, gain access to health insurance and retirement plans, and for other protections like limiting daily labor quotas.

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Hotel workers and HTC union members form a picket line outside the Fairfield Inn & Suites by Marriott New York Manhattan Times Square and the Four Points by Sheraton Midtown on July 7.

HFTP Partner

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gence, emerging technology and innovation across the industry," HFTP said.

Destination AI was first held in 2024. This year, the third annual conference will be held September 29–30 in Washington, D.C.

The summit's theme for its 2026 program "will focus on the business impact of AI and the role emerging technology is playing in driving innovation across hospitality," HFTP said.

"Destination AI has established itself as the preeminent forum dedicated to practical AI education and implementation in hospitality," said Frank Wolfe, CEO of HFTP. "The strength of its audience, the quality of its programming and its focus on real business outcomes have made it an important platform for the industry. We are pleased to support its continued growth and to work together throughout the year, helping professionals stay current on the developments, opportunities and risks that come with AI."

Since the summit's first year, at-

tendance has grown year over year, according to data from Destination AI. Last year, the hospitality summit sold out, drawing more than 300 attendees from 280 hotel companies, HFTP said. This year, organizers expect around 500 attendees.

As part of the collaboration, HFTP is connecting Destination AI with its AI Collective, "a nonprofit initiative advancing responsible AI adoption and education across hospitality," HFTP said.

"We are incredibly excited for this year's Destination AI Hospitality Summit, which we expect will be our best conference yet," said Nazpari Aydin, co-founder and CEO of Destination AI. "After the overwhelming response from last year's attendees, we expanded the event to two days to create even more opportunities for practical learning, candid discussion, and meaningful industry connections. We greatly appreciate HFTP's support and look forward to working together throughout the year to help hospitality leaders understand how AI is evolving and what it means for their businesses."

South Beach Florida Hotel Headed to Foreclosure Sale *Formerly Operated by Bankrupt Sonder*

By Jordan Bradley

The Hillsboro Beach Resort, a former Sonder-branded property in Hillsboro Beach, Florida, will go to foreclosure auction on July 16.

The owners of the luxury resort defaulted on a \$26 million loan from an affiliate of Emerald Creek Capital, according to Broward County records.

Emerald Creek filed the foreclosure lawsuit in February this year against ownership entities managed by principals of BH3 Management, Daniel Lebensohn and Gregory Freedman. Though BH3 Management was not listed as a defendant in the foreclosure filings, associated entities BNH IV HM TRI LLC and 1159 Hillsboro Mile LLC were.

A Broward County judge entered the final judgement against the plaintiffs in April, which includes accrued interest and fees amounting to more than \$40 million in debt.

Prior to the judgement, Emerald

Creek alleged the Hillsboro Beach Resort's landlord defaulted on real estate taxes for the property in March 2024 and was unable to repay the loan when it matured in August last year, despite several advances from Emerald.

According to the *New Pelican*, the Hillsboro property was operated by Sonder—a former tech- and design-forward hospitality company that managed short-term rentals globally between 2014 and last November—beginning in October 2023.

At the time of the initial foreclosure lawsuit, hotel representatives said Sonder's November 2025 bankruptcy impacted the property's ability to refinance, the *Real Deal* reported.

The 91-guest-room luxury resort finished a property-wide renovation in 2021 complete with an outdoor pool, fitness center, beach access and a restaurant, and is currently operating as a Kasa property.

NO Workplace

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wellness initiatives designed to support long-term growth and retention.

In addition to the workplace recognition, readers of *New Orleans City-Business* selected the convention center as the winner in the publication's 2026 Reader Rankings for Best Event & Meeting Facility. The facility features

1.1 million square feet of contiguous exhibit space, making it the largest convention venue in Louisiana and among the largest in the United States.

The convention center has received a series of honors in recent years recognizing both its workplace culture and sustainability efforts, including LEED Gold certification and repeated national recognition for operational excellence.

NEWS

Tim Hygh Departing from Mackinac Island Tourism

By Jonathan Trager

The longtime leader of Mackinac Island Tourism plans to step down after 16 years overseeing the organization that promotes one of Michigan's most popular travel destinations.

Executive Director Tim Hygh announced on July 6 that he'll transition out of the role over the next year. His departure brings to a close a tenure marked by the expansion of the island's tourism marketing efforts and broader involvement in community planning and public policy.

"After 16 [years], stepping away from the Executive Director role comes with mixed feelings—but mostly gratitude," Hygh told *USAE*. "It's been an honor to serve the Mackinac Island community, and so many people have played a role in making this run what it was."

Hygh became the first chief executive of Mackinac Island Tourism after the Tourism Bureau and Convention and Visitors Bureau merged in 2010. During his leadership, the organization broadened its responsibilities beyond marketing to include event planning, advocacy, and collaboration with government and health officials, particularly during the pandemic.

One of Hygh's accomplishments was helping elevate Mackinac Island's profile as an international



Tim Hygh

travel destination. In recent years, the island has received national recognition as a top summer vacation spot, reflecting growing interest from visitors across the United States and abroad.

Hygh expects to remain with the organization through the end of the 2027 tourism season to assist with the leadership transition and help recruit his successor. The organization hasn't announced a timeline for selecting Hygh's replacement.

Hygh noted that during the transition, he intends to establish a foundation to help Michigan public schools fund field trips to the island.

"Every Michigan kid should have the chance to experience Mackinac firsthand," said Hygh. "It's the kind of place that stays with you, and that feels like a worthy next chapter."

Home Builders to Hold Annual Convention Exclusively in Las Vegas

By Jonathan Trager

Orlando is losing one of its largest annual conventions after the National Association of Home Builders' Show will be held annually in Las Vegas beginning in 2027, ending a long-running relationship with the Florida destination.

NAHB said the growing size of the event required additional exhibit space, more hotel room availability, and improved transportation options for attendees. The show will be held exclusively in Las Vegas through at least 2039 under a new agreement.

NAHB Chief Revenue Officer Geoff Cassidy said Orlando had been a longtime partner—alternating as host with Las Vegas since 2003, though not on an annual basis—but the event's growth led organizers to seek a different venue.

"Orlando has been a fantastic host for the show for many years, and we are grateful for their hospitality," Cassidy said. "The significant growth of the International Builders Show and the Kitchen & Bath Industry Show over the years, however, necessitated a change in venues moving forward."

The International Builders' Show, held alongside the Kitchen & Bath

Industry Show as part of Design & Construction Week, drew about 75,000 industry professionals during its final scheduled year in Orlando in 2026.

The departure represents a significant loss for Orlando's convention industry. The event generated hundreds of millions of dollars in economic activity for the region, according to local tourism officials and industry estimates.

Visit Orlando officials said the decision highlights challenges facing major convention destinations, including transportation infrastructure, and mobility, according to FOX 35 Orlando. The organization said it continues to evaluate ways to improve the visitor experience and maintain Orlando's competitiveness in the meetings industry.

The move underscores growing competition among convention cities nationwide as destinations invest in larger facilities, expanded hotel capacity, and easier access for attendees.

Orlando remains home to one of the nation's largest convention facilities, the Orange County Convention Center, which hosts hundreds of events each year and attracts millions of visitors.

NYC Hotels

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zone," requiring some travelers trying to reach their hotels in neighboring blocks to trek far before finding a way through, according to the Times.

A front desk agent from Westgate New York Grand Central, located on an adjacent corner from the skyscraper, told *USAE* that the hotel did not evacuate and had remained "fully operational."

Representatives from both evacuated hotels did not return *USAE* messages requesting comment on the situation by press deadline.

Late in the evening of July 7, New York City Building Commissioner Ahmed Tigano said the building was

stable, with reports of guests and residents slowly being allowed to return to some of the buildings in the frozen zone the following day.

According to the Westin's social media, as of mid-afternoon on July 8, the hotel was "open, safe, and fully operational."

The statement continued: "Yesterday's temporary closure was a precautionary measure related to construction activity at a neighboring building. Hotel operations have now fully resumed, and we continue to prioritize the safety and well-being of our guests and associates in accordance with guidance from local officials."

As of press deadline, it remained unclear whether the re-openings included the Hampton Inn hotel.

W South Beach

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destinations with a spirit the world immediately recognizes: dynamic, expressive, sunlit and full of life," said Dino Michael, Sr. Vice President and Category Head, Hilton Luxury Brands. "For Waldorf Astoria, it is an extraordinary canvas. Waldorf Astoria Miami Beach will bring a new chapter

of elegance, one that honors the destination's cultural energy, coastal beauty and iconic sense of style while creating an experience that feels timeless, deeply personal and entirely of its place."

The Miami Beach luxury hotel is expected to reopen ahead of the forthcoming Waldorf Astoria Miami, which is slated to open in downtown Miami in 2028.

NYC Strike

continued from page 6

Currently, workers in the Fairfield and Four Points hotels' housekeeping departments earn an average rate of \$20.56 an hour, according to HTC, which is less than half the wages earned by a union housekeeper.

The hotel workers have garnered support from New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani, the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA), a state senator, city council members and hotel staff of the Jewel Hotel.

"Come out and negotiate a fair contract," NYSNA President Nancy Hagans said outside the Fairfield Inn & Suites on July 8.

When workers at the Fairfield and Four Points hotels voted to join HTC, "they expected as any New Yorker would that management would sit down and negotiate in good faith," said Mamdani at a rally on July 1. "And yet, four years later, we have gathered here



Nancy Hagans, President of the New York State Nurses Association, voiced support for hotel workers seeking to unionize on July 7.

from every level of government because what we have seen management do instead is intimidate, discriminate and violate your rights."

Workers at the two hotels are encouraging travelers and event planners to boycott the hotels, and the union is warning that the picket lines may interrupt services at the hotel.

The Final Word

Accessibility Is Everyone's Business, So Why Do Tourism Bureaus Pay for It Alone?

By Jake Steinman
Founder, TravelAbility

A traveler who uses a wheelchair checks into a hotel and arrives at her room only to make a frustrating discovery: she cannot open her own guest-room door. Fire codes require the door to be heavy and self-closing. Traditionally, retrofitting that single entryway with an automated opener meant a commercial quote of between \$5,000 and \$10,000—a cost barrier that frequently stalls progress. Today, a newer device does the exact same job for about \$1,750 and installs in 10 minutes.

In the modern landscape of accessibility, engineering is rarely the obstacle. The real obstacle is a systemic question that is catching up to local governments: *Who pays?*

Right now, that question is landing squarely on destination organizations at the worst possible moment. The tourism occupancy taxes that historically funded these bureaus are increasingly contested. In a recent industry survey, roughly 42% of destination organizations reported their budgets are under threat as cities move to redirect lodging-tax revenue into general funds for affordable housing, sanitation, and other core civic services.

In response, many bureaus are shifting their mandates, rebranding from destination marketing organizations into destination management organizations. They are taking formal, structural responsibility for the shared ecosystem that residents and visitors both depend on.

But consider the lopsided arithmetic this responsibility creates: when a tourism bureau funds an accessible asset—whether a specialized ramp, a sensory-friendly museum hour, or reliable digital route information—an out-of-town visitor might utilize it once a year. A local resident living with a disability utilizes it constantly—the restaurant fifty times, the museum monthly, the transit system every single working day.

We do not ask the tourism bureau to pave municipal roads or run the city buses. Yet, accessibility has quietly become the exception. Destinations are being asked to build accessible communities out of shrinking marketing budgets, covering much of the cost of innovations in physical infrastructure whose heaviest users are the people who live there.

This kind of work becomes far easier to fund if we rename the mission. What destinations are really building is not a

checklist of compliance features; they are building independence. They are establishing the physical, digital, and informational systems that let a person of any age living with a disability take part fully and with dignity in a place.

This market is no longer a niche sub-sector; it is the absolute mainstream. In Longwoods International's American Travel Sentiment Study, 17% of travelers report that someone in their party requires accessibility services—a share that closely mirrors the baseline disabled population of any community.

Furthermore, we are standing on the precipice of a "Silver Tsunami." By 2030, every single baby boomer will be 65 or older. McKinsey & Company projects that 30 million Americans over 65 will be living with a disability. Boomers hold roughly half of all U.S. household wealth, with an average net worth of \$1.2 million per household. As this generation moves into their seventies and eighties, the line between "aging" and "disability" effectively disappears.

For millions of older adults, especially veterans, features such as accessible transit and automatic doors can make the difference between aging at home with dignity and moving into assisted living. In 2026, the national median cost of assisted living reached \$75,756 a year. At the same time, states are tightening safety nets; California recently reinstated its \$130,000 Medi-Cal asset limit for long-term care, narrowing access to state-subsidized care without asset depletion.

When a community invests in accessibility, it keeps seniors independent at home and out of subsidized care. TravelAbility calls the immense financial and social value created by this baseline autonomy the "Independence Dividend."

The economic impact of keeping a single individual independent totals roughly \$117,730 per person each year.

Crucially, this \$117,730 dividend does not land on the ledger of the tourism bureau. It lands on hospital systems that see fewer crisis emergency admissions; on local employers who retain experienced older team members; on municipal budgets carrying lighter long-term-care obligations; and on main street businesses that keep an active, affluent customer. Independence pays a massive compound return across the entire civic spectrum.

This is where a systemic provocation turns into a collaborative invitation. If the dividend is shared, the cost must be shared.

City halls, healthcare networks, economic development agencies, pri-

vate employers, and tourism bureaus all draw from the exact same economic well. A destination management organization is perfectly positioned to convene this table—to coordinate accessibility assessments, set localized information standards, and manage the digital infrastructure around accessibility.

But it cannot be asked to bankroll the entire table by itself.

We already have proof of concept for this collaborative approach: Oregon committed approximately \$9 million in state grants to assess accessibility at more than 750 locations across the state using Wheel the World's platform. While the physical fixes proved remarkably inexpensive—often eligible for separate infrastructure grants—the largest immediate return was reputational. The state generated hundreds of millions of impressions of favorable media coverage, earned exposure that usually cost destinations millions of marketing dollars. Direct travel bookings became almost beside the point; the state upgraded core civic infrastructure while positioning itself at the forefront of the longevity economy.

In 2026, America celebrates its



Jake Steinman

250th anniversary. This country was founded on a revolutionary, hard-fought idea about independence. The next 50 years will test a broader, more mature evolution of that ideal: the belief that growing older, getting injured, or being born with a disability does not disqualify a person from the full, vibrant life of a community.

Destinations can, and absolutely should, lead this vital work. But independence is a shared dividend—and everyone who collects it needs to help pay into it.

AGI CEO Series Coming to ASAE Annual Meeting in Indy

By Todd McElwee

ASAE's Associations Governance Institute (AGI) is pulling into Indianapolis for the ASAE Annual Meeting & Exposition, August 15–18. AGI's CEO Series will feature five sessions tailored for association leadership.

"CEO Series is a set of curated sessions exclusively for association CEOs/Executive Directors navigating today's complex and evolving leadership landscape," ASAE said. "These sessions tackle the most pressing challenges CEOs face—from rebooting your leadership skills and navigating the critical CEO–Chair relationship to debating who really owns the hard decisions in your organization."

The CEO Series five sessions include the following:

CEO Confidential: Ask Me Anything

Do your leadership skills need a reboot?

- Stop Pretending the CEO–Chair Relationship Is Easy
- CEOs vs. Boards: Who Owns the Hard Decisions?

- Learning from Each Other: A Peer Exchange for Association CEOs

"Gain unfiltered insights from veteran CEOs in candid, unscripted conversation, explore the real dynamics of board governance, and connect with peers through hands-on exchange designed for leaders who understand the weight of the role," ASAE said. "For experienced CEOs and those new to the role, AGI's CEO Series offers honest dialogue, practical strategies, and forward-thinking perspectives to strengthen your leadership and your organization's future."

Find more information [here](#).

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Strategy, Socializing, and Shorelines on Kiawah Island

For five decades, [Kiawah Island Golf Resort](#) has defined coastal connections set within South Carolina's Lowcountry. A secluded barrier island where salt air, stretches of Spanish moss-draped live oaks, and swaying pampas grass offer refreshing ways to network and strategize. A place where teamwork thrives in open-air venues, over championship rounds, swift serves, or along 10 miles of pristine shoreline.

Regroup and Recharge

Here relationships are built as easily as they are refined. Mornings of bright horizons lead to inspiring days of productivity and perspective. The resort is widely recognized as a planners' paradise, home to myriad indoor and outdoor spaces, including the [West Beach Conference Center](#), featuring 23,000 square feet of purpose-built meeting space mere steps from the sand. Surrounded by towering palms and nature-laden trails tailor-made for impromptu chats, there's an energy here that can be felt from the very start.

Beyond the breathtaking, unspoiled surroundings, business at hand remains top of mind. In-house conference managers and audiovisual professionals ensure flawless meetings that succeed on all levels. Curated preparations from the culinary team are a testament to Southern hospitality—from banquets to plated dinners served indoors, in seaside courtyards, overlooking legendary greens, or on the Grand Lawn at The Sanctuary.

Restaurants to Oyster Roasts

Dining is an essential part of group gatherings at the resort. [The Kiawah Dining Collection](#) features a total of 16 restaurants and eateries across the island. Each brings its own flavor to the table, ranging from the bold flavors of the state's sole Forbes Five-Star dining experience at The Ocean Room steakhouse to authentic Italian cuisine, locally caught seafood, gourmet Mexican flavors served poolside, and locally sourced Wholly Cow ice cream

piled high with decadent toppings.

The [Mingo Point Oyster Roast and BBQ](#) is the resort's longest-standing culinary tradition, highlighted with steamed oysters, slow-cooked barbecue, and live music along the Kiawah River. A must for planners seeking to give their team a true taste of the region's Lowcountry culture and cuisine in Kiawah's signature, spirited, laid-back atmosphere.

Recreation by Land and Sea

Within Kiawah's subtropical climate—framed by the Atlantic Ocean, the Kiawah River, salt marshes, and lagoons—[coastal activities](#) like kayaking and paddleboarding are always in season. Travelers can explore the island at their leisure while bicycling on 30 miles of paved paths or the hard-packed sandy shore. Guided nature tours introduce guests to the flora and fauna of the island, such as loggerhead sea turtles, osprey or Atlantic bottlenose dolphins spotted from the shoreline.

Iconic Rounds

At the nation's premier golf destination, clubs will certainly come into play—on [five championship layouts](#) including The Ocean Course. Just five years away from hosting its third PGA Championship in 2031, this Pete and Alice Dye masterpiece is an experience not to be missed. Additional celebrated designs include Turtle Point by Jack Nicklaus, Osprey Point by Tom Fazio, Oak Point by Clyde Johnston, and Cougar Point by Gary Player. Afterward, distinguished clubhouses are ideal for sharing ideas and toasting a game well-played.

Courtside Connections

For those who prefer to rally, the property's acclaimed [Roy Barth Tennis Center](#) offers 22 state-of-the-art tennis courts, six dedicated pickleball courts, and two new padel courts designed for every skill level. Group and private lessons are also available. Guests can step into the newly renovated Tennis Clubhouse for a



modern pro shop fully stocked with apparel, gear, and accessories, while the Courtside Café is perfect for post-match refueling.

Perch and Play

Indoors, [The Treehouse Activity Center at Night Heron Park](#) offers more ways than ever to branch out and engage in a little friendly competition. At this new recreation destination, colleagues can enjoy two golf SIMS featuring top courses from around the globe, eight full-size bowling lanes, and an arcade with the latest interactive games and classic favorites—everything from Mario Kart to Skee-Ball, shooting hoops, and shuffleboard. Downtime continues at The Perch, kicking back over pub fare and cocktails.

More to Stay For

Whether work or play brings you to the resort, a memorable oceanfront stay awaits. Choose [private Resort Villas](#) with all the comforts of home, or [The Sanctuary](#). The hotel is one of a few U.S. properties with a Triple Forbes Five-Star rating for accommodations, restaurant, and spa, and has also recently been bestowed with a Condé Nast Traveler Triple Crown Distinction. Each provides full access to resort amenities, including pool complexes and preferred times for dining and golf. The resort is easily accessed by car or via Charleston International Airport (CHS), followed by a leisurely drive. Team up with [Kiawah Island Golf Resort](#)—a legacy 50 years in the making.

Beyond the Convention Center: Why Attendee Experience Drives Meeting Success

For years, meeting professionals have evaluated destinations using familiar metrics: convention center square footage, hotel inventory, meeting space, airlift, and budget. Those considerations remain essential, but today's most successful meetings are increasingly defined by something less tangible—the attendee experience.

Destinations that successfully blend exceptional infrastructure with memorable experiences continue to earn recognition from the meetings industry. **San Antonio has consistently ranked among the nation's top meeting destinations, including being named #9 on U.S. News & World Report's 2026–2027 Best Conference Cities list and #16 on Cvent's Top Meeting Destinations in North America.** Those rankings reflect what

planners increasingly value: destinations that not only simplify logistics but also inspire attendees to engage, connect, and return.

Today's planners are looking for cities that don't simply host an event—they help create one.

Today's attendees want more than a destination. They want an authentic connection to the place they are visiting. With more than 300 years of history, San Antonio offers planners a rich cultural foundation for meetings that can be thoughtfully designed to immerse attendees in the city's heritage through experiences that simply can't be replicated elsewhere. From lively Fiesta-themed receptions featuring colorful décor, mariachi music, and folklórico dancers to cu-

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Meeting Success

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rated culinary events showcasing the city's Spanish, German, French, Black American, and Mexican influences, planners can transform networking functions into unforgettable cultural experiences that honor the many communities whose traditions have shaped the city's distinctive identity.

Those experiences extend outdoors. Conference groups can host private River Walk Parades complete with decorated barges, live entertainment, and branded messaging, creating a memorable signature event that brings attendees together while showcasing one of San Antonio's most iconic attractions. Whether it's an opening reception in a historic plaza, dinners in the Pearl District, or an evening celebrating the city's diverse cultural traditions, planners can create meaningful moments that foster connection, strengthen networking, and leave attendees with a lasting appreciation for the destination.

Another big contributor to that experience is walkability.

When hotels, restaurants, entertainment and meeting venues are all connected, attendees spend less time waiting for buses and navigating traffic and more time connecting with one another. Attendees get to experience more of the city and planners can simplify logistics while reducing transportation costs. A walkable downtown convention district also supports sustainability initiatives by minimizing vehicle use and creating a more environmentally friendly event.

San Antonio exemplifies this approach. Anchored by the Henry B. González Convention Center, the city's downtown places thousands of hotel rooms, hundreds of restaurants,

attractions and unique event venues within easy walking distance. The iconic River Walk, often called the "World's Largest Hotel Lobby," connects it all and creates an environment where attendees naturally gather and network throughout the day.

Beyond its convenience, the River Walk also offers opportunities to enhance attendee well-being. Groups can participate in memorable team-building activities, enjoy relaxing river cruises, or simply step away from the energy of the conference to discover quieter stretches for moments of relaxation and reflection.

Equally important is the destination's authenticity.

Attendees no longer want destinations that feel interchangeable. They want experiences that could only happen in one city. Authentic destinations create excitement before attendees even arrive and encourage them to extend their stay, bring family members or return later as leisure travelers.

San Antonio offers exactly that. Rich history, vibrant arts and culture, and centuries-old architecture provide an unmistakable backdrop for meetings and conventions. As home to world-class museums, performing art venues, and the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park—the only UNESCO World Heritage Site in Texas—the city offers attendees the opportunity to experience a destination where history and culture truly come to life.

The culinary scene also plays a role.

Culinary experiences are often among the most memorable moments of any event. Whether attendees are gathering over a chef-curated dinner or sampling local flavors, exceptional food creates connections, sparks conversation, and leaves a lasting impression.



The iconic River Walk is often called the "World's Largest Hotel Lobby."

As the Culinary Capital of Texas®, North America's first UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy, and home to Michelin-recognized restaurants, San Antonio offers no shortage of culinary options. Attendees are encouraged to bring their stretchy pants.

Ease of travel is another factor that shapes the attendee journey.

San Antonio International Airport (SAT) combines an intuitive layout, award-winning customer service, and a location just eight miles from downtown, helping reduce travel fatigue.

When guests can land, check into their hotel, and be at their opening event within minutes, the conference begins on a positive note. With a \$2.5

billion expansion underway and a growing network of over 48 nonstop destinations, SAT is making travel even more convenient for meeting attendees.

It is this combination of world-class meeting infrastructure, authentic experiences, and exceptional hospitality that has earned San Antonio consistent recognition as one of the nation's leading meeting destinations. The meeting room may host the education, but the destination shapes the experience. And when those two elements work together seamlessly, meetings become something far more memorable. They become unforgettable.



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