



Caesars Palace 60th Anniversary Gala Dinner was celebrated within the property's Octavius Ballroom on August 29. Shown here, in a photo from the late 1960s, is Founder Jay Sarno (center) at Bacchanal Room at Caesars Palace. Today, that name lives on through the modern Bacchanal Buffet, which stands as the largest buffet in Las Vegas. Credit: LVCVA Archive

Fred Dixon Returning to Lead NYC Tourism + Conventions

By Jonathan Trager

Fred Dixon is returning to lead NYC Tourism + Conventions, just two years after leaving the organization to become President & CEO of Brand USA, the national tourism marketing organization.

Dixon, who led the New York City tourism organization from 2014 through 2024, will return as President & CEO on December 1, the group announced on August 26.

"Returning to lead NYC Tourism + Conventions is an extraordinary honor and responsibility," Dixon said. "My time at Brand USA gave me a broader perspective on the global travel marketplace and what's required to be competitive for international travelers."

Dixon succeeds Julie Coker, who's departing the organization to take the helm of Visit California on October 1.

His departure comes as Brand USA faces a sharp reduction in federal matching funds. Legislation enacted in 2025 reduced the maximum matching amount from \$100 million to \$20 million.

Brand USA said the reduction would

ASAE Applauds Introduction of the Safeguarding America's Nonprofits Act

By Todd McElwee

ASAE is welcoming the "Safeguarding America's Nonprofits Act" (H.R. 10148), bipartisan legislation clarifies that exemption from federal income tax does not constitute the receipt of "federal financial assistance."

ASAE noted the bill, introduced by U.S. Rep. Greg Steube (R-FL) and U.S.

Rep. Suzan DelBene (D-WA), makes explicit that "federal financial assistance" does not include an exemption from federal income tax. It also stated that without statutory clarity, organizations that accept no federal dollars could find themselves subject to obligations Congress designed only for entities receiving federal funding. For associations, that uncertainty can

impact activities including credentialing, continuing education, and events.

Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE, AAiP, President & CEO, ASAE, said: "Associations are among the most trusted institutions in American life. They set the standards that keep products safe and professions credible, train and credential the workforce, and convene

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Guest Alleges Bait and Switch at Las Vegas OYO Hotel

By Jordan Bradley

OYO Hotel and Casino Las Vegas is garnering national attention after a guest stay went viral.

According to the guest, the hotel was falsely advertising as a different property, the Palette Hotel, but when she arrived at the address listed in her reservation confirmation, she found the poorly-reviewed OYO Hotel she had wanted to avoid.

Ariana Patiño spent several days in early August looking for a hotel to book

for her and her sister ahead of a short trip to Sin City. While looking for a hotel, she searched Booking.com to see a wide variety of price options for their stay, she said in a TikTok series detailing her experiences.

Eventually, they booked at the Palette Hotel at 117 E. Tropicana Ave. When the pair of sisters arrived for their stay, they had trouble finding the Palette Hotel, instead encountering the OYO Hotel, a hotel they had avoided making reserva-

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Tennessee's Mark Ezell Awarded 2026 State Tourism Director of the Year

Dolly Parton's SongTeller Hotel to Open in Nashville Next Month

By Jordan Bradley

The SongTeller Hotel, a new hotel honoring country music queen Dolly Parton's songwriting legacy, is slated to open next month in Nashville.

Designed as a tribute to Parton's musical legacy, the 245 room-and-suite hotel is set to welcome guests beginning September 14, according to the hotel's website. A grand opening ceremony is scheduled for

September 29, according to local news outlet Fox 17 WZTV Nashville.

Decked out in bright colors, butterflies and guitars, the SongTeller Hotel will feature two live music venues: Parton's Live and Jolene's, the latter of which will be located on the hotel's top floor and is styled as a lounge bar with specialty cocktails and locally-influenced small plates.

According to press releases from the SongTeller, the

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NEWS

NCBMP Exploring “The Power of Place” at State of Black Tourism

By Todd McElwee

Believing that the future of tourism is built on insight, informed by data, and strengthened through leadership, the National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals (NCBMP) will unveil the latest findings from its Black Tourism Economic Impact Study during the State of Black Tourism (SOBT) event on September 17 at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library in Washington, DC.

This year’s session is being presented under the theme of “The Power of Place,” with research presented by Adam Sacks of Tourism Economics, an Oxford Economics company, Savannah Mayor Van R. Johnson II, Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott, and Kansas City Mayor

Quinton Lucas will also guide the conversation. Sheila R. Neal, CASE, Associate Vice President, Strategic Alliances, Visit Detroit, has signed on as the moderator.

Jason E. Dunn Sr., CEO, NCBMP, and Phyllis Dickerson, CEO of the African American Mayors Association (AAMA), are hosting.

Asked what he hoped attendees would take away from this year’s event, Dunn told *USAE*: “I want people to leave understanding that Black tourism is not an emerging market. It is an established economic force, and we have the data to prove it. For years, NCBMP has pushed this industry to look beyond representation and start talking seriously about economics.”

He continued: “This year, we’re putting the research in front of the people who can move resources, influence policy and make decisions. But I don’t want this to become another report that gets presented, applauded and put on a shelf. We’re taking what we learned and developing a Mayors Playbook; a practical roadmap cities can use to better understand, attract, leverage and maximize Black travel,

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MLK Jr. Memorial Library
901 G St. NW
Washington, DC 20001

9/17/2026
Thursday

Host:
Jason Dunn, Sr.
Chief Executive Officer
National Coalition Of Black Meeting Professionals

Co-host:
Phyllis Dickerson
Chief Executive Officer
African American Mayors Association

Presenter:
Adam Sacks
President | Tourism Economics
An Oxford Economics Company

Moderator:
Sheila R. Neal, CASE
Associate Vice President,
Strategic Alliances
Visit Detroit

Panelists:
Hon. Van R. Johnson II
First Vice President
National League Of Cities
Mayor, Savannah, Georgia

Hon. Brandon Scott
President
African American Mayors Association
Mayor, Baltimore, Maryland

Hon. Quinton Lucas
Mayor
Kansas City

SongTeller Hotel

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hotel’s live music venues will feature nightly performances from up-and-coming singers and songwriters based in Nashville.

The SongTeller will also host Dolly’s Life of Many Colors Museum, scheduled to welcome ticketed guests beginning September 29, according to the museum’s website. The museum will occupy the entirety of the hotel’s third floor, showcasing each decade of the icon’s life.

“I am very excited about the opening of my Nashville hotel and museum next year,” Parton said in a statement last October. “Broadway has become such a hub of tourism, this felt like the right time to bring something special to all the wonderful activity in Nashville. I’ve always dreamed of creating something here in Music City, and I know we’ve found the perfect addition to the city I call home.”

As the SongTeller prepares to wel-

come guests, the news of Parton’s death at 80 on August 25 sent a shockwave through the country, and especially Music City, where Parton’s influence and impact were acutely felt.

“Dolly Parton has meant so much to Nashville, to Tennessee and to people around the world,” said Deana Ivey, President and CEO of the Nashville CVC, in an emailed statement. “Her music helped define Music City and brought generations of visitors here, but her impact reaches far beyond the songs we all know and love.”

Parton has long been a part of the Nashville community. In 2009, she was inducted into the Music City Walk of Fame, and last year, she was awarded the E.W. “Bud” Wendell Award at the Nashville Hospitality Industry Luncheon.

In a statement on the SongTeller’s website, hotel representatives extended their condolences to Parton’s loved ones, noting that the team was “heartbroken by the loss.”

“This hotel was built to honor Dolly’s



Dolly Parton (center right), alongside Dr. Bob Fischer (far left), former president of Belmont University, was presented with the 2025 E.W. “Bud” Wendell Award at the Hospitality Industry Luncheon last year. The award was presented by Deana Ivey (in red), President & CEO, Nashville CVC, and Nashville Mayor Freddie O’Connell (far right). Credit: Ron Leifeld/NCVC

life, her stories, and her unmistakable spirit. From the spaces inspired by her songs to the warmth our team shares with every guest, her legacy lives in every corner of this place,” the statement said. “Dolly believed in treating people with love, hospitality, and joy—and we are committed to continuing that legacy in everything we do.”

For many Tennesseans, Parton’s passing has hit especially hard. Parton was well known for her philanthropy and hospitable spirit, establishing her Dollywood Foundation and initiatives such as the Imagination Book Library. Parton was also known to contribute to healthcare, education and community support initiatives during her tenure as a Nashville resident.

The outpouring of mourning from

Tennesseans and Americans for Parton was a testament to her impact. Ivey recalled meeting Parton and seeing firsthand her investment in her community and her dedication to supporting those in need.

“I was fortunate to first meet Dolly early in my career in East Tennessee, and I saw firsthand what made her so special. As a woman and a leader, she showed us that strength and kindness could go hand in hand,” Ivey said. “She was incredibly smart, knew exactly who she was and never felt the need to be anyone else to succeed. Even after all she accomplished, she never stopped creating, giving back and investing in Nashville. Her generosity and her legacy in Music City will be felt for years to come.”



Rendering of the SongTeller Hotel lobby

HOTS

HOTS Food Fight... The small town of Buñol, Spain, was painted red—literally—on August 26, the Associated Press reports. Only it's not actually painted with paint, but with tomatoes. The Spanish town has held a city-wide food fight called La Tomatina almost every year since the first food fight in 1945. Everyone wears white and chucks overripe tomatoes at each other on the last Wednesday in August. Nearby buildings are protected with

tarps while more 20,000 people throw tomatoes at each other. The festival has gained international notoriety in recent years, after it was featured in a Bollywood movie, *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (You Only Live Once), in 2011. According to a Spanish news agency, 40% of this year's La Tomatina attendees were expected to be from out of town. HOTS heard there were some kerfuffle's at this year's La Tomatina, and hopes the participants are doing vine now!

✱ ✱ ✱ ✱ ✱

HOTS Corgi Wiggle... Vilnius, Lithuania held the fifth annual Corgi Race Vilnius, drawing their biggest group of attendees and racers since the event's inception, the Associated Press reports. Participants traveled from all across Europe, the United Kingdom and even the United States. According to the event's organizer, Edvinas Miskas, the first Corgi Race Vilnius gathered 40 corgis from one

city, but this year's event gathered 150 from nine countries, "and for the first time we have a participant from the place where the breed originated." The event consisted of competitive qualifiers, semifinals and the main event, in which 94 corgis raced across 82 feet to see which was the fastest. In the end, Gustave the Girl Dog, an American competitor, took first place, according to the AP. HOTS can only imagine how "corg"eous this event was to witness!

WEEKLY NEWS
OF ASSOCIATIONS
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HOTELS

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To ensure publication, all Letters to the Editor must include a telephone number and mailing address in order to verify authenticity.

Complete copies of *USAE* are available for all paid subscribers online. Log onto <https://usaenews.com> and locate the log-in and password boxes. Specific log-in and password information is provided to subscribers via e-mail.

To receive another copy, please contact our circulation dept. at christy@usaenews.com.

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

usaenews.com

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

Nonprofits Act

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the people who solve problems no single company or agency can solve alone. That work depends on their independence. The *Safeguarding America's Nonprofits Act* makes clear what has always been true: tax exemption is not federal financial assistance, and it should never become a lever for government control over organizations that accept no federal dollars. ASAE thanks Congressman Steube and Congresswoman DelBene for introducing

this important legislation and urges members of Congress to support it."

ASAE has supported this clarification through its Community Impact Coalition, a group of more than 100 trade associations, charities, and professional societies formed to educate Congress on the role of the tax-exempt sector. ASAE urges legislators in both parties to support the bill.

"Nonprofits across the country depend on their tax-exempt status to carry out their work," Steube said. "That status should never be treated as a form of government assistance.

"The Safeguarding America's Nonprofits Act puts a clear, permanent rule in statute so nonprofits do not have to worry about their tax exemption being reinterpreted as a government handout."

Associations directly support 1.1 million American jobs, provide \$71.4 billion in wages, and contribute nearly \$28 billion annually in federal, state, and local taxes, ASAE said. Each year, associations hold more than 272,000 events, drawing nearly 52 million participants and generating \$42 billion in community spending.

OYO Hotel

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tions at due to a slew of poor reviews.

Confused, Patiño called the customer service number listed on her reservation and was told to enter the OYO Hotel, located at 115 E. Tropicana Ave.

When they went inside to speak to the front desk agent, the reception area was the same as the photo from the Palette listing, only with OYO branding.

Patiño and her sister approached the front desk agent and told her they were looking for the Palette Hotel.

"She goes, 'Oh, that's us.' I'm like, 'What do you mean? This is OYO.' And she goes, 'Oh, um, yeah, they just put the listing up to see which ad will gain more traction,'" Patiño recalled in the August 10 TikTok post.

The pair attempted to cancel their stay, but OYO's cancellation policy made it financially hard for them to do so. Should they have canceled, OYO would have kept the booking fees they already paid on top of a \$200 cancellation fee.

Throughout her stay, Patiño and her sister had issues with the quality of the room, recounting that the sheets smelled musty and the floors were dirty enough to blacken the bottom of their feet. When they went to check out, the elevators weren't working, and the pair had to descend 18 flights of stairs to check out.

"If I had booked OYO knowing the bad reviews for OYO, and all of this happened, I would have been like I

knew what I was getting myself into, but I didn't because I booked with Palette Las Vegas, and they did not have bad reviews," Patiño shared on TikTok. "Obviously, after we got there, there was some reviews that were on there that were like, 'This place doesn't exist. This is OYO.' Had I read those reviews before we left, or before we booked, I wouldn't have booked."

Patiño said that after arriving at the OYO Hotel and doing some extra digging, she discovered that the hotel was actually listed as a third hotel, the Collection O Hotel Las Vegas. The street addresses for the Palette and Collection O Hotels—listed at 119 E. Tropicana Ave.—do not exist, Patiño alleged. When *USAE* searched for the three street addresses on Google Maps, each one populated in front of the OYO Hotel, and 117 and 119 E. Tropicana Ave. were not found.

Websites for both the Collection O and OYO Hotels are using the same photos of the hotel and portions of the property, like the pool, with altered photos depicting their respective branding. Though the Palette Hotel's website had been taken down by press deadline, Patiño shared photos from her reservation showing the front desk and pool photos were also the same just presented with altered branding.

The Collection O Hotel was still listed on booking website Expedia, but Booking.com had completely removed the three listings as of August 27.

The Collection O listing on Expedia had 22 reviews at press deadline, with many reviewers complaining about the quality of the hotel rooms and customer service. Some guests also said that the hotels weren't functioning, and noted that the hotel wasn't actually the Collection O Hotel as advertised.

The Collection O Hotel website was also still live as of August 27, but the listings appeared to have been removed from other sites like TripAdvisor, Travelocity, and Orbitz.

Neither Patiño nor representatives of OYO Hotels responded to *USAE* request for comment by press deadline.

OYO Hotels is operated by India-based PRISM, and the Palette and Collection O hotel brands are part of PRISM's collections of brands.

In a statement to *USA Today*, OYO representatives said: "As part of our broader dual-brand strategy for the different accommodation options at the property, we were evaluating how different blocks, or room categories could be positioned under different brands. However, the listing went live while the related renovations and signage at the property were still being completed."

"Obviously, after we got there, there was some reviews that were on there that were like, 'This place doesn't exist. This is OYO.' Had I read those reviews before we left, or before we booked, I wouldn't have booked."

USAEExchange

Conversation with Reina Herschdorfer, Director of Marketing, National Meetings & Events, Caesars Entertainment



On August 29, Caesars Palace 60th Anniversary Gala Dinner was celebrated in the property's Octavius Ballroom. Herschdorfer connected with USAE to discuss Caesars Palace's historic status, dining, A-list stars, new developments and more.

USAE: What comes to mind when you think about Caesars Palace?

Herschdorfer: Caesars Palace evokes iconic Las Vegas luxury, cinematic grandeur, and a sense of arrival that few resorts can match. It's where Roman-inspired architecture, world-class entertainment, and beautifully designed meeting spaces converge. A keynote feels like a premiere, a reception feels like a celebration, and planners know their event will carry the unmistakable energy of a legendary brand.

USAE: Please share your favorite Caesars Palace memory, or story

you've heard about the property.

Herschdorfer: One of the most defining stories of Caesars Palace is the origin of its name. Founder Jay Sarno intentionally removed the apostrophe from Caesars so the resort would not be Caesar's Palace; the palace of one ruler, but Caesars Palace, a palace for every guest. That decision became the brand's thesis: luxury shared, not guarded.

This philosophy is why Caesars Palace became one of the most filmed resorts in

the world. Movies such as *Rain Man*, *The Hangover*, *Iron Man*, *Dreamgirls*, and *Ocean's Eleven* chose Caesars Palace because a single frame communicates mythology, glamour, and Las Vegas at its most iconic.

The entertainment legacy is equally cinematic. The Colosseum has hosted the world's greatest headliners including Celine Dion, Elton John, Cher, Mariah Carey, Adele, Rod Stewart, Shania Twain. These artists didn't just perform here—they created eras here.

The missing apostrophe is the promise, and the films and residencies are the proof: Caesars Palace belongs to the people who experience it.

USAE: If you had to pick one, which Caesars Palace restaurant is your favorite? And, what's your go-to dish when there?

Herschdorfer: My favorite restaurant at Caesars Palace is Nobu Restaurant, where luxury, artistry, and

energy meet. My go-to dish is the Black Cod with Miso, a signature plate that feels both comforting and elevated.

Caesars Palace offers more than 20 restaurants, lounges, and bars, from celebrity-driven fine dining to iconic Las Vegas classics. And beyond the flagship property, planners have access to eight additional Caesars Entertainment Las Vegas resorts, each with its own culinary identity. Together, the portfolio delivers hundreds of food and beverage options, ideal for dine-arounds, VIP experiences, executive dinners, and large-scale culinary programming.

USAE: What is one thing a meetings planner might not know about the property, but should?

Herschdorfer: Many planners don't realize how seamlessly the Palace Tower connects to the conference center, allowing attendees to move from guestrooms to sessions in minutes.

Caesars Palace offers more than 300,000 square feet of meeting and event space, including the stunning Octavius Ballroom and Julius Ballroom.

The resort also features the five-

acre Garden of the Gods Pool Oasis, one of the most extraordinary outdoor venues in Las Vegas. Multi-level, Roman-inspired, and visually unmatched, it transforms into a spectacular reception space that sets the tone for an unforgettable event.

USAE: How is Caesars Palace continuing to develop?

Herschdorfer: Caesars Palace continues to evolve with a focus on luxury, entertainment, and elevated meeting experiences. Enhancements include:

Reimagined Presidential Villa and 29 Sky Villas with more than 19,000 square feet of indoor/outdoor space

OMNIA Dayclub and Skybar, adding 121,000 square feet of dynamic event environments

Upgraded conference technology and attendee flow

Continued investment in celebrity-driven dining, entertainment partnerships, and cinematic-quality venues

The development philosophy remains clear: honor the legacy, elevate the luxury, and expand the possibilities for planners.



Caesars Palace

Caesars Palace Milestones

By Todd McElwee

Caesars Palace is celebrating its 60th birthday in 2026. Here are a few of the milestones that have helped define its six decades on the Las Vegas Strip.

1965

February 2: Conceived by successful hotel operator, builder and designer Jay Sarno, construction begins on Caesars Palace.

1966

August 5: Caesars Palace opens

with 680 rooms. Suites in the 14 story tower featured amenities including whirlpool tubs, floor-to-ceiling windows, colorful shag carpeting, round beds and grand pianos. Singer and television star Andy Williams performs.

1970

August 6: The 14-story high-rise known as Centurion Tower (now Nobu Hotel Caesars Palace) is added with 222 guest rooms

The Only Game in Town is the first movie filmed at Caesars Palace. It stars Elizabeth Taylor and Warren Beatty.

1974

March 20: An additional 16-story tower with 361 guest rooms was built adjoining the original Roman Tower.

June 6–19: After a four-year absence, Frank Sinatra returns to Circus Maximus. He is joined by Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie and Pat Henry.

1979

Robert Redford rode on horseback through the Palace Casino in *Electric Horseman*, which also starred Jane Fonda, Willie Nelson and Valerie Perrine.

1988

The Academy Award-winning *Rain Man*, starring Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise, was filmed at Caesars Palace for more than six weeks. In an iconic scene, Cruise's character taught Hoffman's character how to dance in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking The Strip in the suite now known as the Colosseum Tower Flavian Sky Suite.

1992

May: The Forum Shops at Caesars Palace opens with 283,000 square

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Industry Movers



Jiae Kim, CMP, has joined the American Cleaning Institute (ACI) as Senior Director, Meetings. She's one of several new team members who are stepping into leadership roles. Kim will lead the organization's conferences and executive programs—including the ACI Annual Meeting and Industry Convention and Spark Summit. She brings more than a decade of experience managing large-scale events. Kim recently worked at the National Association of Manufacturers.



Douglas Bienenfeld has recently come to Discover Fort Smith as the Director of Sales. He joins the Arkansas bureau with more than 30 years of industry experience. Bienenfeld will lead efforts to attract meetings, conventions, and events that generate overnight stays, increase visitor spending, and drive economic impact. He has served in a variety of leadership roles with Destination Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti CVB, and IHG Hotels & Resorts.



Christopher Grosse has been appointed the Connecticut Convention & Sports Bureau's (CTMEETINGS) Director of Sports Sales/Chief Marketing Officer. CTMEETINGS is the state's official meetings and sports event sales and marketing organization. He'll work to generate new sports events and related meeting business across the state. He comes to this position after serving as the University of Connecticut (UConn) Division of Athletics' senior associate athletic director for external strategy.



Jon Gersonde is now Managing Director at Grand Wailea Maui, A Waldorf Astoria Resort. He enjoys more than 28 years of experience and most recently served as General Manager of The Ritz-Carlton Maui, Kapalua. Prior to that, he held the role of vice president & managing director of Turtle Bay Resort on O'ahu. He worked at The Royal Hawaiian, Kapalua Bay Hotel, and The Westin Maui.

[See more Industry Movers](#)

Fred Dixon

continued from page 1

require a "significant recalibration" of its resources and programming, but the organization hasn't said the funding reduction caused Dixon's departure.

Charles Flateman, Chairman of the NYC Tourism + Conventions board, said Dixon brings experience in New York, national tourism leadership and the international travel market.

"Fred Dixon has the rare combination of foundational New York City expertise, national leadership experience and global perspective that this moment requires," Flateman said.

Until Dixon begins his new role, Flateman will oversee NYC Tourism + Conventions with the organization's executive leadership team.

Dixon said he's returning with a greater appreciation for the city and its tourism industry after his time leading Brand USA.

"I return to New York with that experience, along with a renewed appreciation for the strength of this city and the extraordinary people and businesses that make its visitor economy so vital," he said.

NYC Tourism + Conventions said the city welcomed about 65 million visitors in 2025.

Dixon is leaving Brand USA effective November 13. The organization said its board is developing a search for his successor and that Dixon will remain through his departure to support continuity during the transition.

Dixon said he plans to work with the tourism organization's members, partners, and city leadership when he returns.

"I look forward to working with our members, partners and City leadership to grow visitation, strengthen our global position and ensure tourism continues to deliver for all five boroughs," he said.



Caesars

continued from page 4

feet of space and immediate success. The Forum Shops at Caesars features more than 160 luxury boutiques, restaurants and entertainment experiences in the heart of the Las Vegas Strip.

Wolfgang Puck opens Spago at The Forum Shops at Caesars Palace, introducing the first celebrity chef restaurant to the Las Vegas market and helping usher in a new era of dining on The Strip.

1997

December 19: The Palace Tower is completed with 1,134 rooms and suites throughout 25 floors.

2001

December: Ground broken on The Colosseum. Designed to house Celine Dion's "A New Day...", the venue was set to replace the Circus Maximus Showroom, which had opened in 1966.

2003

March 25: Following nearly two years of construction, The Colosseum opens with the debut of Celine Dion's "A New Day..."

2009

Caesars Palace is featured prominently in the Warner Bros. blockbuster comedy *The Hangover*—a film that went on to be the top-grossing R-rated comedy of all time.

2013

February 4: Caesars Palace and

Nobu Hospitality open the world's first Nobu Hotel, a concept integrating an exclusive 182-room hotel tower with the first Nobu restaurant and lounge on the Las Vegas Strip. Designed by Rockwell Group, the boutique hotel features 18 suites with interiors that showcase natural materials fused with Nobu's signature Japanese elegance.

2015

Tao Group Hospitality opens OMNIA Nightclub at Caesars Palace. The facility features a multi-level design, world-renowned DJ residencies and immersive entertainment experiences, establishing it as one of the premier nightlife destinations on The Strip.

2026

Tao Group Hospitality debuts the 46,000-square-foot OMNIA Dayclub & Skybar on Las Vegas Boulevard at Caesars Palace. Connected to OMNIA Nightclub, the venue offers a 121,000-square-foot day-to-night entertainment experience featuring premier talent, elevated hospitality, luxury amenities, two central pools and several VIP plunge pools.

May: Restaurant Guy Savoy celebrated 20 years at Caesars Palace. The award-winning restaurant remains one of the most acclaimed fine-dining destinations in North America and continues to hold the prestigious AAA Five Diamond designation and the *Forbes* Five-Star Award.

November 2026: LISA will make history with the debut of "VIVA LA LISA," becoming the first K-pop artist to headline a Las Vegas residency.

NEWS

Davidson Hospitality Invests in GMs with New Program

By Jordan Bradley

Hospitality management company Davidson Hospitality Group is doubling down on investing in their managers this year, announcing the new GM Edge program earlier this month.

In its inaugural year, the program consists of nine Davidson team members from varying management positions within its portfolio of hotel and restaurant operations. Using hands-on education, the program is designed to move promising talent from their current positions into general manager roles through structured pathways of internal promotion and talent retention.

Davidson announced the GM Edge program on August 18, but the cohort has been working since the start of the year, according to Davidson COO Jason Reader.

Throughout the year, the inaugural GM Edge cohort have been meeting monthly to share their respective knowledge and experiences, participating in online classes through LinkedIn Learning, job shadowing, and traveling to Davidson Hospitality headquarters in Atlanta throughout the year for on-site job trainings and in-person meetings.

At the end of the year-long

program, the goal is for participants to be able to move into a new role as a general manager to apply the new skills and knowledge they've gained.

When Reader joined Davidson as the company's COO in July 2025, he noticed the hospitality management company didn't have a formal track to promote and advance employees. The company provides full-service hospitality management to 87 hotels and restaurants; more than 230 restaurants, bars, and lounges; and a combined total of 1.4 million square feet of meeting space throughout the United States, Europe and the Caribbean.

"As an organization grows, you're trying to protect culture and do all the right things," Reader told *USAE*. "A company that's growing needs its people to grow with it; that's part of how you stay successful. It's how you provide opportunity."

But in hospitality, and especially in hotel management, the general manager role is often the hardest to break into, Reader said.

"In my opinion, the hardest job to get in the hotel business is your first general manager job," Reader said. "When you apply to be a general manager, I can promise you that there will be other people who apply who've already done it,

so when you haven't been a GM yet, you are going against the grain."

In order to address this hurdle, Davidson's GM Edge program is highly adaptable to an individual participant's professional experience, Reader said.

"If I'm a director of sales in GM Edge, I'm not spending a ton of time doing sales courses on LinkedIn Learning" throughout the GM Edge program, Reader explained. "I'm already a director of sales, so I'm going to spend more time on maybe the accounting piece, the operations piece and the food and beverage piece. So it's not one size fits all. It's tailored to the person-specific experiences."

When Davidson first put the call out to its managed properties around the country, it received only five nominations for the GM Edge program, Reader said. But when they put the call out again, they received a whopping 45 nominations.

In order to make the cohort as effective as possible, Reader said Davidson aimed to have a class of between eight to 12 team members in order to preserve the quality of the education and to support the transition into new GM roles, so when it came time to select the first class from the 45 nominees, there were

a handful of qualities that a candidate needed.

A candidate needed to be experienced enough in hospitality to realistically be around one year away from being able to step into a general manager role, Reader said.

If a front office manager, for example, was pursuing a role as a GM, "you're probably not one year away from being a GM, especially because you haven't been proven as a manager. [FOM] is a leadership position, but you haven't been rooms director or an AGM, or there's probably other things that you need to do first," Reader said.

Davidson also considered how easily a candidate would be able to relocate if needed, and they needed to be nominated by the general manager of their hotel and signed off on by their regional team, Reader said.

The first annual cohort of Davidson's GM Edge program includes:

- Anne Krugman, Director of Sales & Marketing, Newport Harbor Island Resort
- Gabriel Suniega, Hotel Manager, The Westin San Francisco Airport and Aloft SFO
- Hicham El Ibrik, Resort Manager, Islamorada Resort Collection
- Lauren Roberts, Director of Operations, Royal Park Hotel
- Madison Techmanski, Di-

rector of Operations, Margaritaville Hotel San Diego Gaslamp Quarter

- Marina Baronas, Director of Food & Beverage, The Don CeSar

- Nicole Ramamurthy, Hotel Manager, Sheraton Philadelphia University City

- Vivian Chen, Hotel Manager, Paradise Point Resort & Spa; and

- Whitney Rodriguez, Director of Rooms, Baker's Cay Resort, Curio Collection by Hilton.

Most recently, participants traveled to Davidson headquarters to participate in an on-site training that simulated real hotel problems.

"We gave them a pretend hotel and a scenario," Reader said, "and they had to present to their peers and some of the other key members [of Davidson] including myself, what they would do to fix the hotel."

The scenario presented to the cohort included a wonky food and beverage budget-to-revenue ratio, aging capital equipment and a decline in meeting services scores. Each team member gave a 10-minute presentation on how they would address the scenario and fielded questions for five minutes from Davidson leadership and their GM Edge co-participants.

Watching their presentations, Reader said he "was just impressed by the passion, commitment and energy level that these team members have."

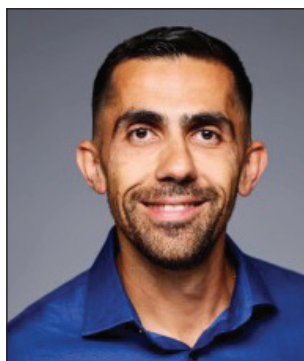
He added: "We're eight months into the program and to see how far they've progressed, seeing them come into their own and have that confidence that they're ready to take that next step has been really, really rewarding, and really cool to see."



Anne Krugman



Gabriel Suniega



Hicham El Ibrik



Lauren Roberts



Madison Techmanski



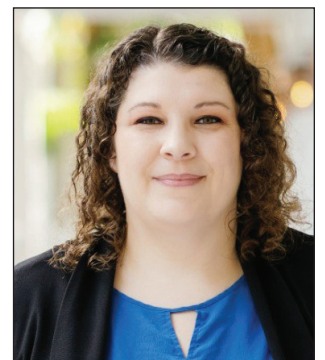
Marina Baronas



Nicole Ramamurthy



Vivian Chen



Whitney Rodriguez

NEWS

Toy Association, Javits Center Announce Toy Fair Dates Through 2032

By Todd McElwee

The Toy Association and New York's Jacob K. Javits Convention Center have announced a five-year partnership for Toy Fair, the largest toy, play, and youth entertainment marketplace in the Western Hemisphere.

The show's 121st edition is set for February, with the event attracting more than 20,000 and featuring north over 800 exhibitors.

"We provided industry leaders with a blank canvas and every reasonable option for review, and after a thorough evaluation, it was clear that New York City in February best meets the needs and goals of our diverse global toy community," said Greg Ahearn, President & CEO of The Toy Association. "We're grateful to the leadership team at the Javits Center for working alongside us to make this vision a reality."

Toy Fair's 2027 run is set for February 20–23. Following that edition the

show will be held on February 26–29, 2028; February 24–27, 2029; February 23–26, 2030; February 22–25, 2031; and February 21–24, 2032.

"Toy Fair and New York have grown together for generations, and we are thrilled that the next chapter of that story will continue at Javits Center," said Joyce Leveston, President & CEO of the Javits Center. "For Javits Center, it's not just about providing space, it's about the partnership we have with our customers. We work closely to create experiences where connections are made and business gets done. It is truly a delight to welcome Toy Fair back to Javits Center for the next five years, and we look forward to all that lies ahead."

The event's longstanding relationship with the Javits Center dates to the venue's opening in 1986. The Toy Association and Javits leadership worked to identify dates that met stakeholders' needs while navigating one of the busiest convention calendars in the nation.



Bluey and Bingo enjoy Toy Fair at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York City.

"As a partner with the Javits Center for 40 years, we shared what mattered most to our industry and Javits leadership rolled up their sleeves to work with us to find a solution," Ahearn said. "Their willingness to

make a five-year commitment is a remarkable demonstration of confidence in our industry and Toy Fair's importance on the global trade show calendar."

Find more information [here](#).

Veronica Castro Tapped to Lead Visit El Paso

By Jonathan Trager

Veronica Castro, CDME, has been named Executive Director of Visit El Paso, the tourism operation under Destination El Paso, after more than two decades with the Texas organization.

Destination El Paso announced Castro's appointment on August 21. She most recently has served as director of tourism development and strategic alliances, a position she has held for nine years.

Castro will oversee the Visit El Paso team and focus on strengthening the city's visitor economy, developing strategic partnerships, and promoting El Paso for leisure travel, meetings, sports, and group business.

"This opportunity represents more than a new title; it represents the community and organization I have had the privilege of serving for more than two decades," Castro said. "I look forward to leading Visit El Paso into its next chapter." Castro succeeds Brooke Underwood, who was promoted to President & CEO of Destination El Paso, effective June 1. Underwood succeeded Jose Garcia in the role that oversees Destination El Paso's three divisions: Visit El Paso, El Paso Live, and El Paso Water Parks. Underwood said Castro's experience made her well suited to lead the tourism operation.

"Veronica has dedicated her career



to Destination El Paso and to sharing the very best of our community with the world," Underwood said. "Her knowledge of this organization, our tourism industry and, most importantly, our community is invaluable."

Castro has worked in tourism development, destination marketing, visitor services, international market development, and strategic partnerships during her career with Destination El Paso. She has helped expand El Paso's tourism presence in the United States, Mexico, and Canada and developed relationships with travel trade professionals, media, tour operators, and industry organizations.

Her work also has earned local recognition. In 2024, the city proclaimed May 16 as Veronica Castro Day in recognition of her 20 years of service to Destination El Paso and El Paso's tourism industry.

Greenbrier Hotel Refinances, Bank Asks for \$52M Judgment

By Jordan Bradley

Owners of the Greenbrier Hotel in West Virginia made a new financing partnership for the Greenbrier Hotel, avoiding a takeover attempt from an affiliate of Omni Hotels & Resorts.

The Justice Family Group, a company owned by family members of Sen. Jim Justice (R-W Va.) and the holding company for the Greenbrier Hotel, announced on August 14 a new partnership with investment firm Kennedy Lewis Investment Management (KLIM) that provides the Justice Family Group with up to \$500 million in funds.

The agreement settles a federal suit brought in April by Omni affiliate White Sulphur Springs Holdings (WSSH) after it purchased \$289 million in debt owed by the hotel to Carter Bank and Trust. In the suit, WSSH sought a court-appointed receivership to take control of the Greenbrier.

"Today marks an exciting new chapter for the Greenbrier and an important moment for everyone who loves this resort," said Jill Justice, D.O. of the Justice Family Group, in an August 14 announcement regarding the new financial arrangement. "This

property is so much more than a resort. It is part of the history of West Virginia, an economic anchor for this community and a place where generations of families have celebrated the most important moments of their lives. Our collaboration provides the financial strength, expertise and long-term investment needed to protect everything that makes The Greenbrier special."

The Justices have owned the historic Greenbrier since 2009. In recent years, the hotel has been at the center of lawsuits amid financial struggles.

While the most recently brought lawsuits between WSSH and the Justice Family Group have been settled by the new partnership with KLIM, another suit still remains.

On August 22, lender First Guaranty Bank asked for a judgement against the Greenbrier Hotel Corp. of approximately \$52.3 million in a federal case initially filed against the hotel by the bank in July 2024 in the U.S. Federal Court in the Southern District of West Virginia, according to local news outlets.

In the suit, First Guaranty Bank argues the Greenbrier Hotel Corp., a subsidiary of the Justice Family Group, breached payment obligations for a \$35 million loan the bank made to the

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NEWS

Tennessee's Mark Ezell Awarded 2026 State Tourism Director of the Year

By Jonathan Trager

Industry peers have selected Mark Ezell, Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development, as the 2026 State Tourism Director of the Year.

Ezell, who has directed Tennessee's tourism strategy since 2019, received the honor on August 25 before a group of more than 1,000 destination marketing professionals at U.S. Travel's ESTO Conference in Philadelphia. He was announced as this year's State Tourism Director of the Year by 2025 honoree Diane Shober, former executive director for the Wyoming Office of Tourism.

Ezell was selected for the award by the U.S. Travel's National Council of State Tourism Directors—a body representing tourism offices from all 50 states and U.S. territories. The award is one of travel's highest honors, recognizing a state tourism director whose vision, innovation, and leadership has driven

exceptional results, elevated their state's profile, and delivered lasting economic impact through travel and tourism.

"Mark and Gov. Lee's innovative approach to tourism promotion has paid big dividends for Tennessee," said Geoff Freeman, President & CEO of the U.S. Travel Association. "Mark's passion for the state has delivered stronger communities, greater

economic opportunity and a tourism industry that proudly showcases the culture and hospitality that set Tennessee apart. This recognition is well deserved, and we congratulate him on the extraordinary impact he continues to make across Tennessee and our industry."

Ezell's work paved the way for rural, distressed, and at-risk communities to have the opportunity to compete alongside more established destinations, according to US Travel.

ment to the engaging on the municipal level. The organization is engaged in a partnership with AAMA.

"This is where the conversation gets bigger," Dunn said. "Mayors understand that tourism is economic development. When thousands of people come into their cities for a meeting, convention or leisure travel, that impact doesn't stop at the



Mark Ezell, Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Tourist Development, was honored on August 25 as 2026 State Tourism Director of the Year at U.S. Travel's ESTO Conference in Philadelphia. He's pictured here along with Ellen Davis of U.S. Travel (left) and 2025 winner Diane Shober.

business leaders, and local communities. Since 2018, visitor spending has increased in 93 of Tennessee's 95 counties.

Candidates for State Tourism Director of the Year are nominated by state and territory tourism directors, with a slate of three finalists presented annually for selection by ballot. Other

finalists included Lauren Bennett McGinty, Executive Director, Explore Minnesota, and Kate Fox, Executive Director, Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism.

NCBMP

continued from page 2

meetings and events. 'The Power of Place. The Proof of Impact' isn't just a theme. It's really the point of this work. We know the power exists. Now we're documenting the impact and giving leaders the tools to act on it."

SOBT continues NCBMP's commit-

convention center or hotels. It moves through restaurants, transportation, small businesses, neighborhoods, jobs and ultimately the city's tax base. That's why our partnership with the African American Mayors Association is so important. We're connecting the economic power of Black travel directly with leaders who have the ability to influence how their cities invest, develop and compete."

He continued: "And the Mayors Playbook is where we move from conversation to execution. We're taking the data discussed at the State of Black Tourism and curating it into a framework mayors can use to ask better questions of their tourism organizations, evaluate where dollars are being invested, strengthen relationships with Black meeting professionals and travelers, and ultimately capture more of this economic opportunity. NCBMP isn't interested in simply proving that Black travelers and meetings matter. We've done that. The next phase is making sure cities understand how to leverage that impact and that our communities participate in the economic benefit it creates. That's leadership. That's economic development. And that's where this conversation has to go next. Because once you understand the impact, you can't pretend you don't see it."

Find more information [here](#).

Greenbrier

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hotel in late 2020 through the Main Street Lending Program, a program established by the Federal Reserve through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, according to court documents.

The request for judgement follows two years of court proceedings. At the outset, First Guaranty alleged the loan provided to the Greenbrier Hotel Corp. first became delinquent in December 2023, when the Greenbrier Hotel Corp. failed to pay 15% of the principal amount of the loan plus interest, according to West Virginia Watch.

In return, the Greenbrier Hotel Corp. filed a counterclaim this February, alleging that First Guaranty inflicted more than \$50 million in financial damage, the Charleston Gazette-Mail reports. The counterclaim argues the loan agreement had originally intended to be a different type of loan, but an addendum the hotel says restricts its assets and access to other financial arrangements that had been signed by Jill Justice was added in violation of "duty of good faith and fair dealing."

In the wake of the Greenbrier's new funding partner, the bank is now arguing that the language of the addendum hadn't been restrictive enough to prevent the Greenbrier's partnership with KLIM. The bank is seeking the \$52.3 million judgment to settle principal loan amount and its accrued interest, the Gazette-Mail reports.

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