



The National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals (NCBMP) held its State of Black Tourism (SOBT) on September 17 at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library in Washington, D.C. The event included a panel discussion with Mayor of Savannah Mayor Van R. Johnson II, Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott, Kansas City Mayor Quinton Lucas. Shown here are Lucas; Sheila R. Neal, CASE, Associate Vice President, Strategic Alliances, Visit Detroit; Phyllis Dickerson, CEO of the African American Mayors Association (AAMA); Scott; Johnson; Kevin L. S. Richardson, NCBMP Chairman; and Jason E. Dunn Sr., CEO, NCBMP.

Unions Put Pressure on Hotel Operators Across the Country

By Jordan Bradley

Hotel worker unions and hotel operators in major cities across the United States have been contending with various stages of contract negotiations in the late summer weeks.

In Chicago, several thousand hotel workers say they are willing to walk off the job if contract demands are not met.

Workers at Unite Here Local 1-represented hotels throughout Chicago are at risk of labor disputes and strike actions as contracts at more than 40 hotels have been expired since September 1. The contracts cover about 7,000 hospitality workers.

The union has issued a travel advisory, warning travelers that a labor dispute may occur and listing the 46 hotels currently without contracts, including The Drake, Fairmont Chicago Millennium Park, Hilton Chicago, Hyatt Regency Chicago, JW Marriott Chicago, Marriott Marquis Chicago, Omni Chicago, The Ritz-Carlton Chicago, The Royal Sonesta Chicago Downtown, and Waldorf Astoria Chicago.

Please turn to page 3

Dennis Edwards Retiring as Head of Visit Raleigh

By Jonathan Trager

Dennis Edwards, who has led Visit Raleigh as President & CEO for nearly 20 years, has announced his retirement effective December 31.

The 44-year hospitality industry veteran took the helm of the North Carolina destination organization in April 2007. Edwards previously held

leadership roles with destination organizations in Fort Lauderdale, Florida; Houston, Texas; Palm Springs, California; Culver City, California; and Sioux City, Iowa.

"It's been an absolute privilege to work for such a dynamic destination with an incredibly talented staff at [Visit Raleigh]," Edwards said. "Wake County has experienced unprecedented

growth in tourism over the past 20 years, and the future is extremely bright for our entire hospitality community."

During Edwards' tenure, visitation to Wake County has skyrocketed from 10.4 million in 2007 to 19.1 million in 2025, while visitor spending has

Please turn to page 5

NCBMP Explores "The Power of Place" at State of Black Tourism

By Todd McElwee

The National Coalition of Black Meetings Professionals (NCBMP) and Tourism Economics, an Oxford Economics Company, had a question: What is the impact of Black meetings and events?

Presenting research from the Black Tourism Economic Impact Study, Adam Sacks, President, Tourism Economics, an Oxford Company, had the answer during NCBMP's State

of Black Tourism (SOBT) at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library in Washington, DC: \$114 billion in total business sales.

SOBT was staged on September 17 under the theme of "The Power of Place." The library's nearly 300-seat auditorium was full.

Sacks broke down the \$114 billion and other significant portions of the Black meetings sector, which impacts north of 578,000 jobs.

Please turn to page 2

Inside

Page 2

Criminal Hospitality Comes to Savannah

Page 4

Garden Grove Officials Require Panic Buttons for Hotel Workers

Page 4

U.S. Industry Leaders Send Letter of Support to Canadian Groups

Page 6

Spotlight on Tanvi Chauhan, PRSA Rising Star Award Winner

TravelAbility Offers New Certification to Summit Attendees

By Jordan Bradley

Attendees of the annual TravelAbility conference will be able to earn a new certificate at this year's summit, organizers told USAE.

The certificate, dubbed Accessability Leader, is available to attendees at no extra cost and is designated to summit goers who attend the conference's core sessions.

The certificate is an evolution of a masterclass

workshop offered at last year's summit, Jake Steinman, founder and CEO of TravelAbility told USAE. The one-hour educational sessions focused on four of the most common disabilities.

TravelAbility's annual summit will convene destination management organization representatives, disability and accessibility experts, tech and practical solution providers, and influencers with disabilities for an eight year. The

Please turn to page 4

NEWS

Criminal Hospitality Comes to Savannah *Marriott Partners with True Crime Nonprofit on Whodunnit Events*

By Jordan Bradley

Put the police tape up, because Marriott International's new partner in crime is making a sensational debut at a Marriott hotel in Savannah this November.

Marriott's loyalty program, Marriott Bonvoy, has partnered with Hamptons Whodunnit, a nonprofit dedicated to gathering true crime experts, bestselling authors, and true crime enthusiasts, to stage a weekend-long event at The Alida, Savannah, a Tribute Portfolio Hotel from November 6–8. The nearby Hotel Orielle, Auto-graph Collection, will also host events throughout the weekend.

Marriott will gather some of the usual suspects for the event, including faces familiar to true crime enthusiasts: bestselling authors Jessica Knoll, Heather Graham, Wanda M. Morris, Emma C. Wells, and Shanora Williams; Barbara Butcher, medical examiner and star of Oxygen's "Death Investigator with Barbara Butcher;" forensic expert Joseph Scott Morgan; and Joe Giacalone, retired sergeant with the New York Police Department and host of the "True Crime with the Sarge" podcast.

The weekend-long gathering will include workshops, panels and events, including a "Wine and Crime" event

that takes participants through a boozy, simulated experience of solving a crime from start to finish.

The Hamptons Whodunnit festival is being held in Savannah due to the seaside city's impressive history and legendary ghost stories, Marriott said.

Marriott's Tribute Portfolio brand of hotels is a collection of independent, "characterful" properties in more than 35 countries. According to Marriott officials, the portfolio of hotels is the perfect place to host a Hamptons Whodunnit event.

"Hamptons Whodunnit brings together curiosity, imagination and the unexpected in a way that feels especially at home to Tribute Portfolio," said Caroline Godden, Sr. Director of Brand Marketing, U.S. and Canada, at Marriott. "It gives travelers a reason to explore a new destination, connect with fellow enthusiasts, and experience a place from a different perspective. Savannah is just the beginning, and we're excited to continue creating moments that inspire travelers to explore."

As an organization, Hamptons Whodunnit has put education at the heart of its mission since its inception in 2023, introducing more than 250 students to career paths in forensic sciences, forensic art, investigation, criminal justice, and law enforcement.



The Alida, Savannah, a Tribute Portfolio by Marriott International hotel will host the Hamptons Whodunnit festival on November 6–8.

As part of the Savannah event, Hamptons Whodunnit will also collaborate with the Savannah College of Art and Design, introducing students to careers adjacent to forensics and true crime.

"We're excited to bring Hamptons Whodunnit to Savannah and give our community a new city to discover," said Carrie Doyle, co-founder and CEO of Hamptons Whodunnit. "What makes our festival unique is the amount of interaction our audience has with our authors and experts, and

this new setting gives us a fresh way to do that without losing the intimate atmosphere that we are renowned for. We're looking forward to taking this next step with Tribute Portfolio and Marriott Bonvoy, and seeing where this first chapter takes us."

Looking forward, Marriott said that guests and true crime enthusiasts can expect more Hamptons Whodunnit events at Marriott Bonvoy properties throughout the United States in 2027.

Find more information about the Savannah event [here](#).

NCBMP

continued from page 1

In 2025, the market saw 29 million participate in meetings and events, 203,000 unique events and a \$1,639 spend per participant.

Travel spending came in at \$27.8 billion, with meetings production recorded at \$20.5 billion. Black meetings comprise a 12% share of the domestic market.

Sacks concluded his presentation by answering "How important are Black meetings and events?" They're massively important, he said.

SOBT also included a panel discussion with Mayor of Savannah Mayor Van R. Johnson II, Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott, and Kansas City Mayor Quinton Lucas. Sheila R. Neal, CASE, Associate Vice President, Strategic Alliances, Visit Detroit signed on as the moderator, with Jason E. Dunn Sr., CEO, NCBMP, and Phyllis Dickerson, CEO of the African American Mayors Association (AAMA), adding to the conversation.

Intentionality, and its relevance to meetings and events was a major

theme. The mayors discussed the significance of cities presenting the complete picture of a destination, including embracing the Black tourism experience via curated agendas, advertising and more. Dickerson discussed being intentional in every single detail in order to meet culture of the groups that are coming into town.

Lucas highlighted the importance of Black neighborhoods and institutions being included, and featured, in films and shows. He referenced how a recent episode of Apple TV's *Ted Lasso* was filmed in Kansas City and included a visit to the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum and other Black cultural touchstones.

Municipal governments and CVBs, and other meetings industry stakeholders, must also be intentional in their dealings with each other. Neal asked the mayors to share how much they knew about the hospitality industry before taking office. Scott, who had been president of the Baltimore City Council, was well-versed on the subject and had pushed for a Black tourism experience before becoming mayor. He also said CVB heads, and

other hospitality leaders, should get to know council members and other politicians, as you never know who will be the next mayor.

Johnson discussed the importance of mayors helping the entirety of the government and community to understand the impact Black meetings, and travel/tourism in general, has on a city.

Dunn stressed to point to the data when doing business, stating "Lead with the \$114 billion."

Hilina D. Ajakaiye, CDME, Chief Strategy Officer, National Coalition of Black Meeting Professionals; and Kevin L. S. Richardson, NCBMP Chairman, also discussed the growth and impact of NCBMP, while thanking everyone for attending SOBT.



Adam Sacks of Tourism Economics, an Oxford Economics company, at the State of Black Tourism (SOBT).

HOTS

HOTS Dolly Tribute... As summer comes to a close and fall ambles in, annual traditions such as visiting pumpkin patches and traversing corn mazes begin to fill our calendars. This year, corn mazes have been cropping up across the United States and even our neighbors to the north in the shape of the iconic (and late, sad to say) Dolly Parton. According to the Associated Press, some 20 farms across a dozen states and two Canadian provinces have carved Parton's iconic grin into corn fields.

Many have also set up games, trivia and photo ops in her honor alongside the mazes. According to Brett Herbst, founder of Maize Inc., a consulting company based in Utah that designed a slew of Parton mazes, the country singer was a "true American treasure." Herbst told AP that "Dolly's impact on the world and her love for farming is immeasurable, and our corn maze tributes now take on new meaning and significance" as they had been in the works months before Parton died of cancer on August 25. HOTS wonders how many renditions of "I Will Always

Love You" will be heard over the corn husk rustle this fall.

✱ ✱ ✱ ✱ ✱

HOTS Mighty Molar... A scientist working on an unrelated project found a perfectly preserved molar of a Pacific mastodon in the San Francisco Bay Area earlier this year, the Associated Press reports. Brigid Lynch, a geomorphologist with Balance Hydrologics told the outlet the tooth "wasn't hard to find." While working on a habitat restoration project for a threatened population of California red-legged

frogs who live in San Mateo County, Lynch said she was studying rocks in a wooded creek when something caught her eye. "It was just sitting in the middle of the creek, halfway in, half out of the water," she told AP. The mastodon molar measures around 9 inches long and belonged to a prehistoric species of elephant that lived some 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. After its discovery, the fossil was donated to Stanford University's Doerr School of Sustainability. HOTS thinks that's one mammoth discovery to make almost on accident! Surely, Lynch won't forget this anytime soon.

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Unions

continued from page 1

Workers are seeking increased wages to keep pace with inflation, year-round healthcare and better pension plans, changes in workload quotas for housekeepers to make them more sustainable and safer, and protections for immigrant workers.

"I know a number of folks have had to take out payday loans. They've been struggling with food insecurity, and struggle to even [pay] for housing," said Karen Kent, President of Local 1, in an interview with local news outlet ABC 7 Chicago.

According to a survey conducted by Local 1 last year, one in eight hotel workers has had to rely on a food pantry within the last year.

The union has not yet held a vote to authorize a strike, but members have pledged to vote yes if negotiations do not move forward, according to Local 1.

Find the full list of hotels [here](#).

City officials back workers outside Boston

In ongoing negotiations between the roughly 1,350 hotel workers of the Unite Here Local 26 union and the Wynn Hotels & Resorts-owned Encore Boston Harbor in Everett, Massachusetts, the Everett City Council has spoken out in support of union workers.

At a September 14 city council meeting, Everett Mayor Robert Van Campen brought forth a resolution in support of the workers striking at Encore. The resolution, which was unanimously passed by council members, sees council members pledging to not eat, hold meetings or stay at the Encore Boston Harbor while a labor dispute is ongoing on site.

"Encore wants to call themselves Encore Boston, but they don't want to pay Boston rates," Van Campen said. He added: "I think it's time to tell Encore we've had enough. Pay the people. Respect the city of Everett. We gave them a deal and a half. An \$800 million profit, and they can't pay a fair wage."

The Encore Boston Harbor's unionized workers have been on strike since September 4, and union representa-



A hotel worker speaks through a megaphone at the picket line in front of Encore Boston Harbor in Everett, Massachusetts, on September 16.

tives are claiming talks with Encore representatives have not

In a statement to local news outlet WGBH, Wynn Resorts said the casino is open to guests, "who continue to enjoy the experience they expect from our resort."

However, union representatives have heard reports of disrupted and slower-than-usual guest services, they told USAE.

The statement from Wynn also said the company is seeking a contract "that is fair, financially sustainable and protects jobs for the long term."

The resolution passed by the Everett City Council also directs the city clerk to send an engrossed copy of the measure to Encore's general manager.

Seattle union workers reach deal, end historic strike

Meanwhile, in Seattle, roughly 115 unionized workers at the Embassy Suites Pioneer Square hotel returned to work on September 15 after securing new contracts that go into effect on January 1, 2027.

The strike lasted 85 days, making it the longest hotel strike in Washington State history, according to Unite Here Local 8, the union representing the

Embassy Suites workers.

"During the 85 days of this historic strike, Embassy Suites workers stood up for each other and showed that change is possible," said Stefan Mortiz, Secretary-Treasurer for Local 8. "This contract includes tremendous wins on fair wages, year-round healthcare, workload, and protections for immigrant workers. It is a victory for all hospitality workers in Seattle."

In the new contract, workers will receive raises for housekeepers that bring starting pay up to \$31.03 per hour; over the life of the four-year contract, housekeepers will see wage increases equal to a 23.3% raise; a \$1 per hour raise for tipped workers; year-round healthcare; reduced workloads for housekeepers and the right for front desk agents to file grievances in regards to workload issues; "a new enforcement mechanism" in the event of an emergency situation impacting immigrant workers at the hotel; and the ability for workers resolving visa and work permit issues to return to the property within two years with their seniority intact.

USAE did not receive comment from Hilton by press deadline.

NEWS

Garden Grove Officials Require Panic Buttons for Hotel Workers

By Jordan Bradley

The city council of Garden Grove, California, which neighbors Anaheim, have approved an ordinance that will require hotels to equip workers with panic buttons beginning in the new year.

Under the ordinance, which passed unanimously in a September 9 meeting, hotel workers who work alone in guest rooms or bathrooms will be given panic buttons to safeguard against attack and harassment.

Hotels in the city are required to equip workers beginning January 1, 2027.

Key points of the ordinance require hotels to purchase personal security devices for workers in isolated areas, train response personnel, notify guests, annually train employees on how to use the panic buttons and under what circumstances, allow employees to stop work and contact law enforcement without retaliation in the event of a violent incident, provide up to eight hours of paid time following a threatening or violent incident, and maintain records of events for up to three years.

The measure also outlined enforcement protocols for the city manager and fines for violations.

The measure applies to all of the city's hotels, motels and lodging establishments, which total around 25 properties and approximately 3,500 guest rooms.

The measure takes inspiration from three other California cities—Anaheim, Irvine, and Ontario—that have previously implemented similar ordinances, city officials said.

Deputy Director Greg Blodgett told council members that officials had researched different cities' policies, worked with local hotels and the city attorney to craft the ordinance.

Blodgett noted that most of the city's hotels were part of major chains, like Hilton and

Marriott International, which have company-wide policies in place that equip workers who work their shifts in isolation with panic buttons.

However, around 10 lodging establishments in Garden Grove currently do not, he said, and the span between the adoption of the ordinance on September 9 to its implementation on January 1, 2027, would give the city time to inform the hotels of their new obligations.

At the first reading of the ordinance

at an August 25 city council meeting, the ordinance only allowed for three hours of paid time in the aftermath or an incident, a point that council member Ariana Arestegui challenged.

"I am concerned about the three-hour max for workers when they have to report an incident involving a violent action or threatening conduct," she said in the meeting. "This is not

necessarily a situation that will wrap up neatly in a three-hour timeframe."

Arestegui said if an incident occurred at the outset of a worker's shift, they would lose an entire day's pay, and suggested the ordinance require up to eight hours of paid time be provided.

Mayor Pro Tem George Brietigam agreed with Arestegui, noting that in his previous work in law enforcement it often took individuals more than three hours to move through the medical system following a violent incident.

"Three hours, if the worst happens, is not even going to scratch the amount of time it's going to take you at the doctor or the hospital—let alone reporting it to the [police department]," Brietigam said.

The measure applies to all of the city's hotels, motels and lodging establishments, which total around 25 properties and approximately 3,500 guest rooms.

U.S. Industry Leaders Send Letter of Support to Canadian Groups

By Jonathan Trager

Presidents and CEOs of industry associations in the United States have sent a letter to Canadian organizations expressing solidarity and support amidst heightened political tensions between the two countries.

Signatories to the letter, dated September 10, are Don Welsh, Destinations International (DI); Paul van Deventer, Meeting Professionals International; Amy Calvert, Events Industry Council; Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE, AAiP, American Society of Association Executives; Sherrif Karamat, CAE, PCMA and CEMA; and John David, STS, Sports Events & Tourism Association.

The letter states in part: "The escalating rhetoric, trade disputes and tariffs between our countries have created understandable frustration, uncertainty and anger. It goes without saying these are trying and challenging times between Canada and the United States.

"As leaders of organizations representing the travel, tourism, meetings, events and association communities, we want to say something clearly to our Canadian colleagues:

"We value you. We appreciate you. And we remain committed to our partnership with you."

In an interview with *USAE*, Welsh said it has been "troublesome" to see aggressive tariffs and heated rhetoric put a strain on the relationship between the United States and Canada.

During Welsh's tenure over the last decade as head of DI, the association has increased Canadian membership from just a handful of organizations to more than 70,

Welsh said. DI has also established partnerships with Destination Canada and the Tourism Industry Association of Canada and created the Canadian Destination Leadership Council within the association.

Welsh said he was "cautiously optimistic" that the relationship between U.S. President Donald Trump and Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney was "on the mend" until recent events, which included a breakdown in trade talks, the imposition of a 50% tax on many Canadian goods, and an executive order to rename Lake Ontario to "Lake America" within U.S. federal databases.

"I think there has been a genuine felt hurt by many of our Canadian friends that we can't describe because we haven't been on the receiving end of these aggressions," Welsh said. "We wanted to convey we think of you, and we're your friends, and we want to be there for you."

Welsh noted that all the signatories to the letter have an event or meeting taking place in Canada within the next few months. DI's Advocacy Summit will be held in Ottawa from October 20–22.

"[The letter] was something we were going to send by ourselves, but then I talked to the other CEOs about it," said Welsh. "It was never intended to do anything other than express our support and gratitude and appreciation for them during these tough times."

DI isn't a political organization, Welsh said, but the association has an obligation to support all of its members and partners, who have "expressed great appreciation for the support."

Read the full letter [here](#).

TravelAbility

continued from page 1

summit will take place in Tampa on November 9–11 at the Hilton Tampa Downtown.

In preparing for this year's summit, Steinman and the TravelAbility team realized that attendees of the conference often return to their organizations as "the most qualified person" when it comes to accessibility. The new certificate is a way to recognize the knowledge earned in a formalized professional development designation.

Throughout the course of the three-day summit, attendees will have access to more than 40 sessions on key trends and practical strategies in accessible travel, more than 50 leading accessibility experts within the travel industry, insights from 15 DMO leaders in accessible travel, the latest in accessibility research and data, and a network of industry peers and specialists.

Steinman said the cost of attending the summit—about \$3,500 when factoring in registration, accommodations and travel—is a small price to pay when comparing it to the cost of an accessibility consultant, which

he estimates would run three to four times that rate.

Steinman said having a thorough baseline of accessibility knowledge allows someone to address organizational challenges and get the ball rolling on accessibility before reaching for a consultant.

"As an Accessibility Leader, even if they brought in Wheel the World [or] any other consultant... they'd have a better idea of how to be more efficient with them," Steinman said.

He added that a lot of addressing accessibility comes down to "where to start" in situations where there isn't a budget or bandwidth on a team for accessibility improvements.

That's where the connections made at TravelAbility come in.

"It's not just those classes—it's really the people they meet, the relationships they're building," Steinman said.

To celebrate the new Accessibility Leader certification, TravelAbility will share the names of attendees who earned the designation after the conclusion of this year's summit through the organization's website, Steinman said.

Find more information about the 2026 TravelAbility Summit [here](#).

Industry Movers



Andrew J. Clark has been promoted to Sr. Digital Marketing Manager at the Atlanta CVB (ACVB). He'll lead integrated digital marketing strategy, overseeing website usability and discoverability, customer experience and marketing technology. Clark joined ACVB in 2023 as a digital marketing and media manager. Outside of ACVB, Clark is active in the community. He has been recognized as one of Georgia's most promising young leaders by Young Gamechangers.



Sean Clancy has joined the Hilton San Diego Bayfront as the General Manager. He has three decades of experience. Most recently, he was Vice President and General Manager of the Sheraton San Diego Resort. Clancy has held leadership roles in Miami Beach and Philadelphia. He spent eight years with Hilton, serving at the Arizona Biltmore and Boca Raton Resort & Club, while both were Waldorf Astoria resorts.



Neal J. Couture, CAE, FASAE, has been named President & CEO of the Institute for Supply Management (ISM). Couture brings more than 25 years of experience leading professional associations, credentialing organizations and educational enterprises. He was CEO of the American Society for Nondestructive Testing, which represents more than 35,000 members and certified professionals across 120 countries. Couture was as Executive Director of the National Contract Management Association.



Anneliese Engle has joined Visit Oxnard as its Business Development Assistant. She'll support meetings, group sales and travel trade efforts, including planner outreach, tradeshow preparation, lead tracking and coordination with hotel and tourism partners. She'll also assist with meetings-focused marketing initiatives designed to help bring more group business to Oxnard. Engle first joined the organization as a marketing intern before advancing into a business development internship.

[See more Industry Movers](#)

NetChoice Sues Illinois Over New Tax Provisions

By **Todd McElwee**

Tech association NetChoice has filed two complaints against the State of Illinois to block enforcement of newly enacted tax provisions, the Social Media User Tax and the Digital Ad Tax.

The association said both measures unconstitutionally and discriminatorily single out digital services, in direct violation of the First Amendment and the federal Permanent Internet Tax Freedom Act (PITFA).

"Illinois' new internet taxes firmly establish the state's opposition to online speech, innovation, and its own business community," said Paul Taske, Director of the NetChoice Litigation Center. "The Supreme Court has made abundantly clear that legislators cannot target a subset of media for disfavored taxation, but that's precisely what these taxes do. Not only are they flatly unconstitutional under the First Amendment, but they blatantly disregard Congress's clear judgment under PITFA that digital services cannot be subject to discriminatory taxation."

NetChoice noted the Social Media User Tax imposes fees on platforms based on the number of Illinois users they reach, exempting services with fewer than 100,000 users while penalizing those with larger audiences. The U.S. Supreme Court has stated the government may not tax one category of speaker more heavily than another. Illinois' Social Media User Tax follows the same blueprint NetChoice is already challenging in *NetChoice v. Chi-*

cago, a pending suit over the city's own per-user Social Media Amusement Tax.

Both the Social Media User Tax and the Digital Ad Tax are in direct violation of PITFA, the federal law by which Congress expressly barred states from imposing "discriminatory taxes on electronic commerce," the association said. It added they apply exclusively to online services while leaving comparable offline counterparts—social clubs, community centers, professional associations, and traditional advertising—untouched.

"This is precisely the sort of digital-only taxation Congress intended to preempt, and similar laws, including Maryland's Digital Advertising Tax, have already been struck down by courts on comparable grounds," NetChoice said.

The association added: "Because the Social Media User Tax is a flat fee untethered to a company's actual revenue or profit in Illinois, some services may choose to limit or exit the Illinois market altogether—cutting residents off from vital communication, educational, and community-organizing tools they rely on daily. Local businesses, including restaurants, auto dealers, and community organizations, will also face higher costs to reach customers through online ads under the new Digital Ad Tax. This tax raises the cost of doing business, costs that are likely to be passed on to Illinois consumers, and harms entrepreneurs' ability to grow."

Find more information [here](#).

Edwards

continued from page 1

surged from \$1.7 billion to more than \$3.4 billion, respectively.

During his leadership, Wake County hosted numerous major events such as the NHL All-Star Game, NHL Stadium Series, NCAA Men's basketball tournaments, and NCAA Men's and Women's College Cups.

Edwards also oversaw the creation of the 10-year Wake County Destination Strategic Plan 2028 (DSP 2028), which provided a foundation for the approval and development of the new Red Hat Amphitheater, Atlantic Union Bank Convention Center (formerly the Raleigh Convention Center) expansion, the 600-room Omni Hotel, and the enhancements taking place at the Lenovo Center. He also worked with Travel South and Visit North Carolina to bring the MICHELIN Guide to Wake County and North Carolina.

Edwards is currently Chair of the North Carolina Travel and Tourism Board and serves on numerous other boards, including the U.S. Travel Association, North Carolina Travel & Tourism Coalition, Downtown Raleigh Alliance, Dix Park Conservancy, and Wake County Economic Development.

Melissa Chunn, General Manager at Renaissance Raleigh North Hills Hotel and Chair of Visit Raleigh, called Edwards "a true veteran

and pioneer" and thanked him for his "leadership, passion, and unwavering commitment to making Wake County a destination that shines."

"Through his passion, vision and relentless drive, Wake County has truly become a destination of choice for so many," Chunn said. "Although Denny will be deeply missed, his greatest legacy is the pathway he created and the strong foundation he established under his leadership. His impact will continue to guide Wake County tourism forward, inspiring others to build upon his vision and carry it to even greater heights."

Visit Raleigh has a succession plan and anticipates making an announcement on Edwards' replacement soon.



Rising Stars

Spotlight on Tanvi Chauhan, PRSA Rising Star Award Winner

By Jonathan Trager

While growing up in Africa, Tanvi Chauhan wanted to be an international diplomat. Today, as Communications Manager for Georgia's Visit Savannah and the Savannah Area Chamber of Commerce, she acts as an ambassador to the world for a U.S. destination.

"Taking the stories of Savannah and telling them to people all over the nation and the world has been such an enriching experience, and a very personally fulfilling one," said Chauhan.

The 33-year-old public relations professional has been in her current position for four years. She and her brother were born to Indian parents who relocated their family to Zimbabwe when Chauhan was 5 years old and then to the United States when she was 17.

"As an immigrant, I'm very proud of my parents, who took the brave step of crossing the ocean not once but twice for their family, and my work is a tribute to them," she said.

Chauhan attended the small college of Brewton-Parker Christian University, where she began studying biology. While titrating a chemical in a lab and waiting for color to change, Chauhan had an "epiphany" that she said led her to switch her major to international relations.

"I realized I had to go with my heart and focus on something with a people and community element to it," she said.

Chauhan then pursued and achieved a master's degree in international relations with a focus on global affairs from Troy University in Alabama. Publishing her graduate thesis in peer-reviewed academic journals led

to Chauhan co-authoring an academic textbook about the region around the Caspian Sea.

Chauhan's entrance into the world of destination organizations, came after she attended an event called "Annual Global Trade and Investment Symposium." There, she met a man from the Savannah Economic Development Authority who opened her eyes to the destination from a "global perspective," which led to her interviewing for her current position.

One challenge Chauhan faces in her line of work is getting people to understand what earned media or public relations actually entails. All of the work that leads to a feature about Savannah being published in *Vogue* magazine isn't obvious, she noted.

"Earned media looks really easy when you see it happen, but the backstory is a lot of relationship building," Chauhan said.

On August 6 at the Union League Club in Chicago, Chauhan received the Rising Star Award from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) during the association's Women of Impact Summit & Awards.

"I was so glad and grateful to every single person who believed in me," said Chauhan. "It was just a sliver of joy."

Chauhan received that honor in tandem with her colleague, Supriya Christopher, Visit Savannah's Director of Public Relations, who received a Women of Impact Award in the travel & tourism category. The pair has achieved among the highest amount



of earned media for any destination organization, Chauhan said.

"Supriya is wonderful to work with, and she has been such a great visionary for Savannah," Chauhan said.

The most important piece of advice Chauhan said she can offer to anyone who wants to succeed in promoting a

destination is to "know the people" who live there.

"Without the people, you don't have the story," she said. "Know the community, and believe in the story when you're pitching it with genuine, authentic storytelling. If you don't believe in it, then nobody else will."

American Gaming Association Projects \$29.5B in Legal NFL Wagering

By Todd McElwee

Americans are estimated to legally wager \$29.5 billion on the 2026 NFL season through U.S. regulated commercial sportsbooks, according to the American Gaming Association (AGA).

Last year, \$29.4 billion was legally wagered with AGA pointing to the rise of prediction markets for the stagnation.

"We're excited for the NFL season to kickoff, as are millions of fans eager to engage with their favorite teams. Since the Supreme Court struck down the federal sports betting ban in 2018, legalized sports betting had seen tremendous growth," said Bill Miller, President & CEO, AGA. "But

this year is different. Since the widespread launch of backdoor sports betting on so-called 'prediction markets,' the growth of legal handle has stalled."

AGA said prediction markets are rapidly expanding backdoor sports betting offerings across all 50 states and Washington, D.C. Prediction markets are online platforms where participants buy and sell contracts tied to the outcomes of uncertain future events, such as elections, economic data, or sports, Fidelity Investments said.

"These platforms are operating outside the regulatory frameworks governing sports betting in the 40 jurisdictions where it is legal, while also bypassing the laws prohibiting sports betting in the 11 states that have cho-

sen not to legalize it," AGA said.

Since the start of last year's football season, legal commercial sports betting handle growth has slowed significantly, AGA said. This comes as the legal market continues to mature, and as prediction markets expand their sports offerings nationwide. Sports bets make up about 80% of the volume of Kalshi, which offers prediction market bets. That includes an estimated \$5.1 billion in volume from users between the ages 18-20, which is below the legal age in 35-of-40 jurisdictions where sports betting is legal.

The legal, regulated gaming industry supports 1.8 million jobs and generates roughly \$18 billion a year in sports betting tax revenue for community projects such as education,

infrastructure, and public services. By contrast, "prediction markets" such as Kalshi and Polymarket are estimated to have siphoned more than \$1.3 billion in potential state gaming tax revenue since 2025.

"These 'prediction market' platforms are dangerously misleading consumers by marketing sports wagers as an investment, rather than what it is: entertainment," said Miller. "Kalshi and other 'prediction markets' say they don't need to follow state- and tribal-regulated sports betting laws or pay state gaming taxes. Their defiance means consumers, including teenagers and freshmen, placing bets without the protections, oversight, and accountability that the legal market provides."

Scene at PCMA's Convening EMEA & Convene 4 Climate (C4C) in Lisbon



NEWS

AAHOA Launches New Marketplace for Members

By Jordan Bradley

The Asian American Hotel Owners Association (AAHOA) and two industry partners announced on September 14 the launch of a new marketplace interface for members to purchase goods and services.

The new marketplace is the result of a partnership between AAHOA, Folio, a hospitality financial operations and procurement platform, and Avendra International; and offers AAHOA members “a faster,

easier way” to get what they need at their hotel by “taking advantage of the collective buying power and benefits provided by AAHOA,” the association said.

The marketplace now provides simplified purchasing for operators through a centralized catalog, a unified cart, and one landing page for tracking and managing orders.

“The vision for the new AAHOA Marketplace has always been centered on creating greater value for our members,” said Laura Lee Blake, Pres-

ident and CEO of AAHOA. “Working with Folio and Avendra has allowed us to create an experience that combines purchasing power with ease of use.”

AAHOA Chairman Rahul Patel said the new marketplace succeeds in that vision by bringing “together valuable procurement opportunities and technology that make it easier for hotel owners to access negotiated savings, streamline operations and control costs.”

He added: “It’s a meaningful benefit our members can put to work right

away, giving them more time to focus on their hotels and guests.”

The new marketplace is also formatted for mobile use, which makes it faster and easier for AAHOA members new to the marketplace to sign up and submit orders.

For operators overseeing one or more independent hotels, the streamline design of the new marketplace “addresses a longstanding challenge with adopting procurement technology,” AAHOA said.

Find more information [here](#).

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Where Business Meets the Bay: The New Gold Standard for Professional Gatherings

The landscape of the meetings and events industry is shifting. Today's event managers and meeting planners are looking for more than just square footage; they are seeking authentic experiences in destinations that offer a vibrant "pulse". The Tampa Convention Center has evolved into a premier, award-winning destination that offers this authenticity at one of the best venues in the country.

Waterfront Destination

While "mega-centers" often feel disconnected, the Tampa Convention Center offers a personalized, waterfront location that places attendees directly in the energy of Downtown Tampa, Florida. The prime setting along the Garrison Channel and the Tampa Riverwalk ensures that the city's best features are always within reach.

Following the largest renovation project in its history, the center added new waterfront meeting rooms featuring floor-to-ceiling windows to take in the area's natural beauty. Rooms connect directly to the Exhibit Hall, providing scenic views that match the dynamic energy of the surrounding downtown district.

The facility consists of four levels of versatile space:

Exhibit Hall: 200,000 total square feet, divisible into three sections.

Ballroom: 36,000 square feet, divisible into four sections.

Additional Meeting Space: 50 meeting rooms, including 26 waterfront meeting rooms.

Pre-function Space: Over 84,000 square feet of flexible space.

Outdoor Event Areas: Unique spaces on the Tampa Riverwalk or The Sail Plaza.

Walkable Convention District

Visitors to the Tampa Convention Center enjoy direct access to the city's top hotels, Michelin-star restaurants, and attractions. Tampa's walkable hotel package offers more than 3,000 rooms across familiar brands with appealing variety in product and price



The Tampa Convention Center is situated on the waterfront in the heart of Tampa, Florida, offering attendees easy access to Tampa's best attractions, dining, and boating.

points. The neighboring Westshore Business District includes an additional 8,000 rooms within close proximity.

Attendees can access the waterfront convention center by walking along the scenic Riverwalk, or they can choose to explore the city by water. The Pirate Water Taxi offers 18 stops along the Hillsborough River. Several boating attractions in the center's marina create unique off-site event possibilities.

Guests can explore the rich culture of the Ybor City Historic District via the free streetcar, or catch a Tampa Bay Lightning game at the Benchmark International Arena a short walk away. The center is also steps away from the \$3 billion Water Street development -- the first neighborhood in the world certified for advancing healthy lifestyles -- and attractions like the Florida Aquarium.

Award-Winning Service

The facility's "secret sauce" is a commitment to hospitality that has secured the Stella Award for Best Convention Center in the Southeast for three years running as well as the 2026 Venue Excellence Award from the International Association of Venue

Managers (IAVM). This recognition is particularly meaningful because it is voted on by the meeting planners who have experienced the facility firsthand.

The team is anchored by professionals with elite credentials, including the Certified Venue Professional (CVP) and Certified Protection Professional (CPP) designations. This expertise translates to measurable results, with Event Managers recently achieving perfect satisfaction scores in 86% of client surveys.

Leading the Way in Sustainability

The Tampa Convention Center demonstrates that legacy facilities can achieve elite standards in sustainability. Highlighting its dedication to environmental responsibility, the venue earned LEED Silver certification for Building Operations and Maintenance (O+M) in 2025. This milestone is particularly impressive for a facility that first opened its doors in 1990. The certification recognizes a sustained initiative to lower the building's environmental impact through extensive modernization of its lighting and HVAC systems to optimize energy efficiency.

The center's eco-friendly practices offer event organizers seamless corporate social responsibility (CSR) solutions. A key highlight of these efforts is the venue's collaboration with the Hillsborough Education Foundation's "Teaching Tools for Schools" program, which successfully donated 7.7 tons of leftover items, ranging from furniture and decor to office supplies, for local classrooms in 2025.

A Commitment to Inclusivity

Tampa prides itself on being a diverse and inclusive community with something to offer everyone. The City of Tampa consistently receives a perfect score of 100 on the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's Municipal Equality Index, scoring highly across

all categories: non-discrimination laws, municipality as employer, services and programs, law enforcement, and leadership on LGBTQ+ equality.

In 2026, Tampa Convention Center launched a dedicated Sensory Accessibility Program. Recognizing that large-scale events can be overwhelming, the facility provides sensory kits and specialized training for staff to better assist neurodivergent guests or those with communication challenges. This program includes the use of emergency communication cards to ensure safety and comfort for all visitors.

Culinary Excellence

At the Tampa Convention Center, the dining experience is designed to be as memorable as the keynote address. The venue's experienced culinary team specializes in high-volume, world-class hospitality, focusing on immersive food and beverage menus that weave the spirit of an event into every meal.

Modern meetings require a sophisticated approach to dietary needs. Whether a group requires gluten-free, vegan, kosher, or allergen-aware options, the experienced chefs craft customized menus that ensure every guest enjoys a premier dining experience without compromise.

On-site dining options include The Sail Plaza, featuring a 360-degree waterfront bar, and Big Ray's Fish Camp, which serves famous local dishes like the Cuban sandwich and award-winning grouper sandwich, along with Harpoon Harry's Crab House, offering sit-down dining with a large menu of seafood, sushi, steaks, and comfort food.

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The Experience Adds Up



Great meetings deserve great destinations. Minneapolis gives attendees plenty of reasons to arrive early, stay longer and come back.

What attendees can expect in Minneapolis:

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[restaurants](#)

[Live music, world class](#)

[theaters and legendary](#)

[entertainment](#)

[Fifteen professional women's](#)

[and men's sports teams](#)

[The Mississippi River and](#)

[miles of trails](#)

[Distinct neighborhoods filled](#)

[with local shops, breweries](#)

[and culture](#)

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Roz Dixon

Associate Director,

Business Development

Meet Minneapolis

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RozD@minneapolis.org

Aspirational Incentive Travel, Closer Than You Think

Stretching from the Kittatinny Mountains in the north to coastal gems dotting its southernmost shores, New Jersey's coveted locales and resorts are home to rewarding incentive trips — all without the hassle and cost of international travel. If you were contemplating a far-flung global location, your consideration set should include these Garden State recommendations that check the same boxes and proudly stand as award-winning travel destinations in their own right.

Monte Carlo Mystique in Atlantic City

During the Prohibition era, Atlantic City was dubbed “The World’s Playground.” Today, this glittering destination by the sea still dazzles visitors with high-stakes gaming, exceptional entertainment, fine dining, spa pampering and vibrant nightlife. Casino resorts along its famous oceanfront boardwalk and scenic back bays provide the luxurious accommodations, engaging experiences and group venues essential to incentive travel.

Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa draws travelers from all around the globe. With 2,000 high-end guestrooms and more than 20 flexible [event venues](#), this luxe property can easily host large incentive groups. Treat your attendees to indulgent treatments in Spa Toccare and fine dining in Angeline by Michael Symon, B-Prime Steakhouse and other on-site restaurants. Then bring them to their feet with ovation-worthy shows in The Music Box.

Guests are ensured a legendary stay in the AAA Four Diamond-rated [Caesars Atlantic City](#). Reserve accommodations for your C-suite in its Nobu Hotel with 82 completely transformed rooms sitting high atop its Centurion

Tower. Introduce your attendees to the healing power of water in Qua Baths & Spa and keep them entertained in Circus Maximus Theater.

Ocean Casino Resort, another AAA Four Diamond property, has also been acclaimed by Casino Player Magazine as offering the city’s “Best Hotel Rooms.” Floor-to-ceiling windows in all 1,860 accommodations frame stunning Atlantic Ocean and skyline vistas in this oceanfront resort. Your high-fliers can experience waves of wellness in its Exhale Spa + Bathhouse, named the #1 spa in New Jersey as well as take an upscale culinary journey in Amada, Chez Frites, Linguini By The Sea and Ocean Steak and catch headline entertainment in Ovation Hall.

French Riviera Chic in Cape May

As America’s First Seaside Resort and the country’s only National Historic Landmark City, Cape May brings visitors doses of lively history and coastal cache equal to the French Riviera. Of course not all of this destination’s accolades are born from the past. *Condé Nast Traveler* recently named Cape May among the “20 East Coast Beach Towns Worth a Visit, From Florida to Maine.”

Your incentive trip winners can join the roster of honored guests — such as U.S. Presidents Ulysses S. Grant, Franklin Pierce, James Buchanan and Benjamin Harrison and famed composer John Philip Sousa — when they check in to the AAA Three Diamond-rated [Congress Hall](#). This 107-room property has also been named one of *USA Today*’s “10Best Hotels and Resorts in the US for Historic Stays.” Outstanding amenities include The Sea Spa, beach and poolside service (in season) and enchanting guest activities. There are also a number of versatile group settings to assemble your attendees.

Planning a smaller-scale corporate retreat? **Beach Plum Farm & Cottages** in West Cape May is the ideal field-to-fork destination boasting impressive industry accolades. It has been designated a One Key Hotel by the MICHELIN Guide as well as being recognized as one of the “Best Foodie Hotels” by the Oprah Daily Hotel O-Wards. Overnight accommodations include three charming and distinctive cottages and three rustic yet refined barns, but the



Crystal Spring Resort, Hamburg, NJ

true star of the resort is its seasonal Harvest Dinner Series.

Amalfi Coast Ambiance in Stone Harbor

Stone Harbor is an oceanfront destination that whispers quiet luxury and exhales natural beauty. Instead of a bustling boardwalk, it offers tree-lined boulevards bordered by manicured gardens. Rather than souvenir shops and pizzerias, it is dotted with independent boutiques and fine dining spots, all within an easy stroll of one another.

The harborside location of [The Reeds at Shelter Haven](#) serves up tranquil waterway dining and stunning sunset views. The hotel draws its aesthetic from the sandy dunes and sea-salted air just outside its doors. Group gatherings are effortless in its numerous event spaces. Your attendees can enjoy year-round entertainment and hotel happenings as well as beach service and rooftop deck relaxation in season. They’ll also want to write home about the indulgent wellness treatments they enjoy in Salt Spa.

Peak Swiss Alps in the Skylands

The northwestern corner of New Jersey, known as the Skylands, serves as a pinnacle of inspiration for your incentive trip attendees. Home to the state’s tallest summit and outdoors that beckon adventurers across every season, this destination provides a momentous mountain escape.

The Grand Cascades Lodge at [Crystal Springs Resort](#) in Hamburg delivers AAA Four Diamond accom-

modations across 250 guestrooms. Event spaces and team-building opportunities abound. Glamorous pampering comes easily in Reflections Spa. Avid golfers enjoy an exceptional player experience on the resort’s six courses. Epicures and oenophiles delight in Restaurant Latour and its Wine Spectator Grand Award-winning wine cellar. Between spa treatments and gourmet meals, your attendees can take part in countless activities ranging from archery to yoga.

Tuscan Charm in the Central Jersey Countryside

Expansive farms, lush orchards and rolling pastures across the region helped New Jersey live up to its Garden State moniker. If agritourism and eating local are on the menu for your incentive trip, you’ve found your ideal destination.

Once an estate owned by royalty, what is now [Pendry Natirar](#) in Peapack provides culinary excellence, a luxe spa and elevated hospitality to groups and guests throughout every moment of their stay. Ninety Acres is the resort’s signature fine dining restaurant, where dishes are made from ingredients sourced directly from their sustainable farm. Unique experiences can be enjoyed in The Cooking School and through a vast assortment of seasonal happenings and spirited activities, while relaxation is ensured in the tranquil Spa Pendry.

Feeling inspired? Begin planning your incentive travel to New Jersey at [VisitNJ.org/Meetings](#).



Borgata Hotel & Casino, Atlantic City, NJ



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IMEX LAS VEGAS
OCTOBER 13-15 2026

At IMEX America, Encore Invites Planners to Unlock Their Design DNA



By Madeleine Bart, Vice President of Global Brand & Direct Customer Marketing, Encore

What makes an event memorable?

It's rarely one thing. It's the way the environment makes you feel when you walk into a room. It's an unexpected interaction that sparks a conversation. It's technology that makes the experience easier or more personal. Quite often, it's the people you meet and the connections you make along the way.

At Encore, we believe those moments don't happen by accident. They're the result of intentional design.

That idea is at the heart of our experience at IMEX America this year. As IMEX explores why "Design Matters," Encore is inviting attendees to "Unlock Your Design DNA" and experience how thoughtful event design, emerging technology and human connection can work together to create events that are more engaging, memorable and measurable.

Rather than simply telling attendees what's possible, we want them to experience it for themselves.

Turning Research Into Experience
Connection is something planners

tell us is tremendously important, which is why it's our starting point.

Research from Encore and Boldpush found that nearly half of planners (49 percent) say peer-to-peer networking is the most important factor in event success. Yet the research also uncovered a disconnect between what planners say attendees value and how many events are actually structured.

That raises an important question for all of us: If connection is one of the outcomes we value most, are we designing for it intentionally?

At IMEX, we're taking that research off the page and putting it into practice.

Attendees will enter the **Encore Design Lab**, an immersive journey where interactive stations explore different aspects of event experience. Along the way, our expert designers will help participants connect their ideas with evolving attendee expectations and consider how different design choices can influence engagement, learning and impact.

The journey ultimately leads to a multimedia design theater, where attendees can see and feel how an immersive environment can elevate a message and influence the way content is experienced.

The larger lesson is that experience design isn't decoration. It starts by defining what you want people to think, feel and do, and then making intentional choices that support those outcomes.

Technology With a Purpose

Technology is another important part of that equation, but it shouldn't be the starting point.

There is no shortage of exciting technology available to planners today. AI alone is rapidly creating new possibilities. But the question shouldn't simply be, "What new technology can we add?" It should be,

"How can this technology improve the experience we're trying to create?"

At IMEX, attendees can explore RFID smart badges that turn credentials into an engagement layer, transparent OLED displays that transform signage into an interactive experience and an AI concierge that connects attendees' interests with personalized insights and recommendations. An AI photobooth creates individualized images based on participant interests, while polling and Q&A technology gives audiences a voice and provides organizers with real-time insight into what matters to them.

Each demonstrates a different possibility. But technology is most powerful when attendees aren't thinking about the technology at all. They're thinking about how easy it was to find something, how personally relevant an interaction felt or how much more connected they were to the experience.

That's an important distinction as AI and other emerging technologies become more prevalent. Our research found that mobile apps currently deliver the highest connection ROI, while AI's impact grows when it is thoughtfully integrated into the overall event design.

Innovation should always serve the experience, not the other way around.

Education By Design

The Encore Education Hub is designed around the real decisions planners are making every day: how to create the connections attendees value, make every budget dollar work harder, determine which emerging technologies are worth the investment and collaborate more effectively with venues and production partners.

Sessions will bring those challenges to life through research, real-world examples and practical strategies. Planners can explore what new data reveals about the experiences attendees really want; which technologies and trends are likely to shape events through 2027; and how AI is changing

everything from attendee experiences to the internet infrastructure required to support them.

We'll also tackle some of the less glamorous, but equally important, decisions behind successful events. Encore and Hilton will take attendees behind hotel pricing and explore how greater transparency and earlier collaboration can lead to stronger budgets and fewer surprises. Another session will examine five planning decisions that can help uncover hidden costs, reduce last-minute changes and protect planners' time, money and team energy.

Through three real-world examples, attendees will see how research, personalization and early collaboration among planning, destination and production partners can turn existing investments into more connected and valuable experiences.

The common thread is intentionality. We want planners to leave the Education Hub not simply inspired by what's possible, but with specific ideas, questions and strategies they can take back and apply to their own events.

Discover Your Design DNA

Encore supports events of virtually every size, from global conferences and product launches to intimate corporate offsites and networking experiences. Across those events, we see the same truth repeatedly: Great experiences come from aligning creative ideas, technology, production and human needs around a clear purpose.

That's ultimately what we want attendees to discover at IMEX America.

Every audience, objective and organization is different. "Unlock Your Design DNA" is about helping planners become more intentional about the choices they make and giving them new tools to bring their ideas to life.

Because when we start with the experience we want people to have, we can create something more powerful than an impressive event.

We can create an experience people genuinely want to be part of.





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