



Sherrif Karamat, CAE, President & CEO, PCMA and CEMA; Paul Van Deventer, President & CEO, MPI; and Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE, AAiP, President & CEO, ASAE, explored neuroinclusion research that the ASAE Research Foundation produced in partnership with the MPI Foundation during a session at IMEX America. Find more information [here](#).

Workers Strike at Six Chicago Hotels

More Could Join Action Soon, Union Says

By Jordan Bradley

Hundreds of Chicago hotel workers at six hotels went on strike on October 9, just as the city prepared to welcome runners for the annual Chicago Marathon on October 11.

The hotels, represented by the Unite Here Local 1 union, have been without a contract for roughly 7,000 union workers at more than 40 hotels across the city since September 1, the union said. Workers are seeking increased wages, better health care coverage and worker protections, and workload adjustments.

The hotels still on strike at *USAE* press deadline included Millennium Knickerbocker Hotel, Palmer House, Sheraton Grand Chicago Riverwalk, Waldorf Astoria, The Westin Chicago River North and Westin Michigan Avenue.

The strike began on the day that about 55,000 runners prepared to participate in the annual Chicago Marathon. Event organizers estimate that around 1.7 million spectators also attend the event each year.

Marriott, which owns the Westin Michigan Avenue, did not return *USAE* request for comment by press

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Hurricane Isaias Didn't Shut Down 'America's Largest Block Party'

By Jordan Bradley

For one beloved annual festival along Mississippi's Gulf Coast, Hurricane Isaias didn't destroy the fun.

The coast's annual Cruisin' the Coast—which has earned the moniker "America's Largest Block Party"—went off without a hitch, according to Mississippi Hotel & Lodging Association's Executive Director Linda Hornsby.

Cruisin' the Coast (CTC) is an annual week-long classic car festival that runs from Sunday to Sunday, and has been gathering antique, classic and hot rod vehicles along 30 miles of beach-side highway.

CTC is the state's largest special event, with a total of 12 cities and "designated stops" participating in the event, including the Mississippi Hotel & Lodging Association (MHLA)

headquarters of Biloxi.

"It is outstanding," said Hornsby, who has been involved with the event since its inception, of the CTC. "It is just a tremendous success and impact—economic impact—not only on the coast but throughout the state. [There are] people that travel throughout the state to get here, and there's just no question of the impact

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Destination DC Debuts Meetings Capitalized at IMEX America

By Todd McElwee

Turning Washington, D.C.'s intellectual capital into experiences designed for meeting planners,

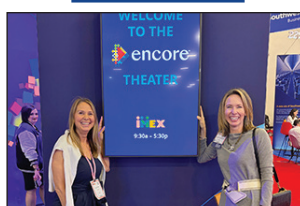
Destination DC launched Meetings Capitalized during IMEX America at Mandalay Bay, Las Vegas on October 13. The campaign is a new approach to meeting design focused on experiences only available in the district.

Destination DC said the initiative makes Wash-

ington, D.C.'s intellectual capital tangible through a collection of flexible experiences. Planners can incorporate the city's universities, associations, think tanks, research centers, museums, cultural institutions, advocacy organizations and global institutions into their existing programs. The bureau added this gives attendees opportunities to engage with experts, explore new perspectives and learn in

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Loren Gold Tapped to Lead Visit Raleigh

By Jonathan Trager

Loren Gold, Executive Vice President of Visit Raleigh in North Carolina, will take the helm of the organization as its next President & CEO, effective January 1.

The organization's board voted unanimously on October 13 to make Gold the successor to sitting leader Dennis Edwards, who announced last month that he'll retire at the end of the year. Gold joined Visit Raleigh in 2005 as director of sales and has served in

his current role since 2007.

"A tourism career is not defined by titles, but by the opportunity to create meaningful community impact, build strategic relationships and help all our destination partners succeed," said Gold. "As I begin this new role, I am reminded that growth is driven by embracing new opportunities, staying a lifelong learner, pursuing innovation and consistently finding ways to add value. I'm deeply honored to accept this new role,

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NEWS

Hollywood Hotel Introduces New “Synth Human” AI Guest Assistant

By Jordan Bradley

The Sheraton Universal Hotel in Los Angeles, California, has a new guest services employee: Rosa, the “Synth Human” AI assistant.

Guests in need of restaurant or attraction recommendations or who have questions about parking, reservations, room service, amenities and other hotel FAQs, can now come “face-to-face” with a digital AI assistant who is “available around the clock” on guests’ phones via interactive video call, according to Sizzle, the tech company behind Rosa’s launch at the property.

“Guests simply scan a QR code in their arrival welcome letter to meet

Rosa and begin a conversation,” Sizzle said in an October 13 announcement. “She provides a single conversational starting point” for guest questions, “helping guests get the information they need and connect with the appropriate hotel team when human assistance is required.”

Rosa can converse with guests in more than 30 languages, and guests don’t need to download an app or use dedicated hardware at the hotel to interact with her, according to Sizzle.

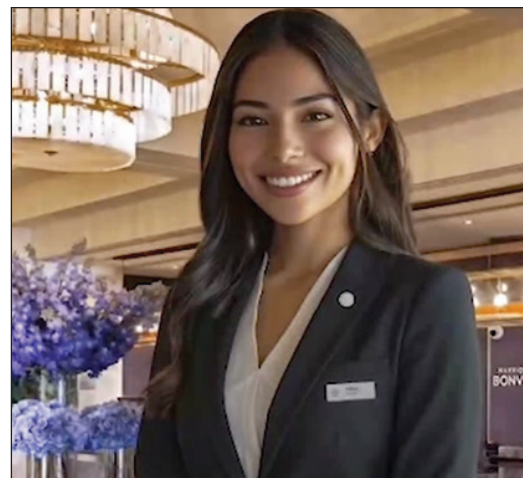
“Our guests have come here to enjoy themselves, and every moment of their visit matters,” said Tom Beedon, General Manager of the Sheraton Universal Hotel. “Rosa helps them spend less time figuring out the details

and more time enjoying what brought them here. Whether they need something from our team or help planning their day, we want the next step to feel effortless.”

Sizzle, an entertainment studio, created Rosa exclusively for the Sheraton Universal Hotel, which is located beside Universal Studios Hollywood and Universal CityWalk. The AI assistant “combines conversational AI with the craft of onscreen production,” Sizzle said. “Her appearance, voice and personality are designed to express the property’s welcome through natural, individual video conversations.”

Sizzle created “Synth Humans” such as Rosa as a way for hoteliers to better reach and connect with guests, according to the organization’s founder and CEO, Brian Weiner.

“Synth Humans are operational intelligence. Personified,” said Weiner. “We’re giving a hotel’s expertise the ability to meet each guest face to face, understand what matters to them and help them make more of their stay. Sheraton Universal demonstrates how this technology can extend premium hospitality beyond the property and become part



A screenshot of Rosa, the Sheraton Universal Hotel's new “Synth Human” AI assistant

of the entire guest journey.”

On the hotel operations side, because Rosa is available directly on a guest’s phone by way of QR code hotel staff don’t have to manager Rosa’s hardware—like a tablet or kiosk, something that Sheraton Universal Hotel officials find appealing.

“Technology earns its place in a hotel when it improves the stay and makes sound business sense,” said Russell Cox, Owner’s Representative for Sheraton Universal Hotel. “Rosa gives us a sophisticated, personal way to serve guests on the phones they already carry, without a hardware investment in every room or introducing advertising into the guest experience.”

Loren Gold

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energized by the opportunities ahead for Greater Raleigh and excited to help shape our destination’s next chapter.”

Gold has worked in the hospitality industry for nearly 40 years. Before joining Visit Raleigh, he held positions in the Washington, D.C., area as director of national sales in Wyndham International’s National Sales Office and as national sales manager for Marriott Hotels and Resorts.

Gold also founded City Reps Inc., the nation’s first company dedicated exclusively to multiple CVB representation. He generated meeting and tradeshow business leads for bureaus in Cincinnati, Houston, Long Beach, Memphis, Minneapolis, Providence, and San Jose.

Melissa Chunn, Chair of the Visit Raleigh Board of Directors, said the board is confident Gold has “the right combination of experience, leadership

and vision to help the county maximize opportunities as a premier destination in the meetings and conventions, sports and leisure markets.”

“Gold has tremendous relationships with local partners and stakeholders and is extremely well respected throughout the tourism industry. His knowledge and understanding of the industry and our community make him the perfect person for the position,” said Chunn.

Chunn noted there’s \$2 billion in new tourism infrastructure under development in Wake County, which is also in the midst of executing the 10-year Destination Strategic Plan 2028 (DSP 2028).

“This succession plan will ensure a seamless leadership transition so Visit Raleigh staff can continue their great work, bringing visitors to Wake County as the county’s hospitality industry maintains its upward momentum,” Chunn added.

In his new role, Gold will oversee a staff of 35 and a \$12.5 million budget. He’ll also continue to serve on the Atlantic Union Bank Convention Center Commission, the Granicus Destinations (formerly Simpleview) Advisory Board and the Wake County Hospitality Alliance.

Gold expressed gratitude to Edwards for his “exceptional leadership and mentorship” and said it has been “a true privilege” to work alongside him for nearly 20 years. “I am equally grateful to our incredible Visit Raleigh team, whose passion and dedication inspire me every day, and to our Board of Directors for their confidence in me and their unwavering support of Wake County tourism,” Gold said.



Destinations International Highlights New Language Guides on Dictionary Day

By Jonathan Trager

Destinations International (DI) used Dictionary Day on October 16 to remind professionals at destination organizations to choose language that effectively communicates the industry’s value to local communities.

The association highlighted its 2026 Tourism Lexicon and Social Impact Lexicon, newly released resources that are designed to help destination organizations communicate tourism’s value to residents, elected officials, and other stakeholders.

“Words matter because words shape understanding and foster human connection,” said Don Welsh, President & CEO of DI. “The work of destination organizations has evolved considerably, but sometimes the language we use to describe that work

has not kept pace. The right words can help people understand that tourism is about much more than attracting visitors. It is about strengthening communities, supporting local businesses, creating opportunity, and improving quality of life.”

The association has developed and updated its Tourism Lexicon annually since 2018. The Tourism Lexicon has offered recommendations for explaining tourism’s contributions in ways that connected with community priorities, including economic opportunity, local business growth, quality of life, and community well-being.

The 2026 Tourism Lexicon includes editions for the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, with English and Canadian French versions available. The Social Impact Lexicon

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HOTS

HOTS Tumbling Jack-O-Lantern...
An inflatable jack-o-lantern went on a stroll through Cary, North Carolina, as the last blasts from Hurricane Isaias passed through the town, the Associated Press reports. The pumpkin's adventure turned out to be a boon for the business of its owner. Michael Phillips, owner of Phillips Farm, told AP that the pumpkin's escape was "the best advertising we could have asked for." Phillips opted not to inflate the jack-o-lantern while a tornado warning was in effect, but as soon as the sun peeked through the

clouds, Phillips' dad, Lee, pumped the sucker up. "All of a sudden, we started getting like 35-, 40-mile-an-hour wind gusts out of nowhere," Phillips said. "And then, 'Bam.' It just started going." As Phillips' inflatable gourd tumbled along, it picked up social media fans along the way, which led to free advertising for his farm. **HOTS** thinks this is one way to get into the Halloween spirit.

✧ ✧ ✧ ✧ ✧

HOTS Homeward Bound... A dog missing in Yellowstone National Park for more than a month was reunited with her owners on October 14, the Associated Press reports. Luna, a 10-year-old Jack Russel terrier, bolted from her family's cabin while they were vacationing in the park. Luna eluded efforts to recapture her as "fears for her survival mounted and winter weather approached," according to AP. During her month away from family, Luna was spotted around the park "crossing intersections, strolling through employee housing and entering lodges through automatic doors." Eventually, Luna was captured by a live trap baited with scraps from a t-shirt and pillowcase belonging to



Encore's Candace Mueller, Senior Director, Communications; and Amanda Armstrong, Senior Vice President, Industry Relations, at their organization's booth at IMEX America.

her family. "She's underweight, but that's to be expected. She's alert and in good spirits," said Katie Boucher, a volunteer leading Luna's rescue efforts

and spokesperson for her family. "I was crying all the way up here from the park." **HOTS** thinks that's one lucky—and spunky!—dog.

WEEKLY NEWS
OF ASSOCIATIONS
CVB AND
HOTELS

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Chicago Strike

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deadline. However, in a statement to Axios, the company said Marriott representatives "remain available to meet with the local union negotiating committee to reach an agreement that is fair to all parties."

"We're out here fighting during Marathon Week," said Edward Matthews, a cafeteria aid at the Westin Michigan Avenue. "We're fighting for better wages. We're fighting for better health care. We're fighting for our families, and we are united. We're gonna fight until they come to the negotiating table with respect for us as the workers who keeps this place running, I'm doing it for my five kids. I'm doing it for all the employees that I work beside, that I feed every day, and we're going to continue to fight until we have the respect of the company."

Union workers, including hotel cooks, servers, housekeepers and front desk associates, have been holding protests into the wee hours at the six impacted hotels, with picket lines and drumming outside the properties.

An employee with local WGN Radio, Lauren Lapka, said the protests outside the Sheraton Grand on the

Chicago Riverwalk have been impacting her sleep.

"It's so loud," Lapka told the outlet. "I have a white noise machine. I have a fan. Nothing drowns it out. Only Air-Pods, and it has to be noise canceling. I pretty much have to jack the volume completely up."

In an October 9 Reddit thread about the strike, commenters who were traveling to Chicago to participate in the marathon landed on both sides of the dispute. Some commenters commended the striking workers while others

complained about the impact of the union's picket line on their sleep.

One commenter said that they "felt gross crossing the line at the Sheraton, but didn't even know about it until we showed up at 11 this morning." The guest had already paid for the hotel

One commenter said that they "felt gross crossing the line at the Sheraton, but didn't even know about it until we showed up at 11 this morning."

Dictionary Day

continued from page 2

focuses on communicating tourism's broader contributions to communities.

"A destination organization can have compelling data and a powerful story, but neither will have its full impact if we communicate in language that only our own industry understands," said Sophia Hyder Hock, Chief

and "could not have afforded staying somewhere else."

Another commenter staying at the Loews hotel across the street from the Sheraton said striking hotel workers "were beating drums and yelling into megaphones all during the night. My sympathy for the cause is completely gone."

Commenters also discussed the impact to guest services. Of the Palmer House Hotel, a commenter said that "they have temp workers getting all the rooms cleaned for check ins. They have no housekeeping service daily and the food and beverage is limited."

According to Marriott, their Chicago hotels are prepared to respond to the change in staffing as a result of striking workers.

"Our hotels have well-established protocols in place to operate and take care of guests in the event of any impact to staffing," Marriott said in a statement to Axios.

Impact Officer at DI.

The lexicons are intended for use in media interviews, board presentations, strategic planning, websites, social media campaigns, and community engagement efforts.

Dictionary Day is observed annually on October 16, the birthday of Noah Webster, the lexicographer whose dictionaries helped shape American English.

Find the 2026 Lexicons [here](#).

NEWS

Colorado Hotel Calls on Sundance for Support *Workers Attempt to Unionize*

By Jordan Bradley

Workers at the Boulderado Hotel in Boulder, Colorado, are asking organizers of the Sundance Film Festival to stand in solidarity as they attempt to unionize.

The annual festival is scheduled to make its debut in Boulder on January 21–31, 2027, and has made the hotel its headquarters during the event. Unite Here, the national union representing hospitality workers, has been working with Boulderado hotel workers amid an ongoing labor dispute, and the group is seeking support in their fight from Sundance organizers, according to an October 13 release from Unite Here.

The historic hotel was purchased by AJ Capital Partners, a Nashville-based private equity group that founded the Graduate Hotel brand in March of last year. According to the union, which does not yet represent workers

at the hotel, the Hotel Boulderado is managed by Schulte Hospitality Group “and is due to become a Graduate by Hilton Hotel.”

Employees of the hotel have been attempting to organize a union since July, Unite Here said, but have been met with alleged interference on the part of management. They have held strikes and other actions to bring attention to the situation.

Just ahead of the October 15 opening of Sundance Festival ticket sales, Unite Here released the statement noting that workers at the hotel are asking festival organizers to “support them and use its influence to urge management to resolve the labor dispute before the festival begins. Currently the Sundance Film Festival website makes no mention of the ongoing labor dispute, potential disruptions, or contingency plans if festivalgoers are confronted with a picket line.”

Unite Here is also alleging that

“workers at the Boulderado have been squeezed by both the rapidly rising cost of living and understaffing.”

According to the Boulder Reporting Lab, an estimated two dozen employees have lost their jobs since AJ Capital bought the property. Workers who remained have said that their shifts had been cut as well, with staff seeing reductions in shifts from four to five days a week down to two or three, the outlet reported.

However, “it’s not just fewer shifts,” Liz Lytle, a front of house employee, told the Boulder Reporting Lab in July. “Your normal eight-hour shift or six-hour shift is not four hours.”

She added: “In the five years I’ve worked there, no one has ever brought up needing to unionize until recently. That just shows how bad things turned, so quickly.”

A housekeeper also told the outlet that prior to AJ Capital’s purchase of the Boulderado, she had been ex-

pected to clean 11 rooms per day, but under the new management, she is now expected to clean 20 to 22 rooms.

AJ Capital and Sundance did not return *USAE* request for comment and clarification prior to deadline.

The Sundance Film Festival has been held in Park City, Utah, since its inception in 1985, but the 2027 iteration of the cultural phenomenon marks the first time the festival is being held in Boulder.

“Sundance picked Boulder. We love our town and want all these new visitors to love it, too,” said Birdie Smart, Front Desk Supervisor, Hotel Boulderado, in the statement. “Workers like us are usually overlooked, but we’re an important part of making sure an event like the Sundance Film Festival is a success. We take pride in that. But that success can’t come at the expense of the people who made Boulder before Sundance got here and will keep it going after the festival ends.”

DC Meetings

continued from page 1

locations that bring the topic to life.

“Washington, D.C. has always been home to a concentration of intellectual capital, leadership and ideas that are shaping our world,” said Elliott L. Ferguson II, President & CEO, Destination DC. “Meetings Capitalized gives planners a way to bring that expertise into their programs, creating experiences that are more relevant and engaging for attendees. By connecting meetings to the people and institutions that define Washington, DC we’re helping planners create programs that extend beyond a traditional conference experience.”

Meetings Capitalized is built around three pillars of Washington, D.C.:

Leadership Experience: Connect with the people and organizations shaping the future. Opportunities explore how leadership is practiced by engaging directly with industry leaders.

Power & Influence: Access think tanks, research centers, policy organizations and advocacy groups where ideas intersect with decision-making, giving attendees direct perspective from people driving change.

Global Exchange: Bring international organizations, diplomatic voices,

global institutions and diverse perspectives into the meeting experience to deepen understanding of the forces shaping businesses and industries.

Destination DC serves as the curator, connector and translator behind the program by identifying relevant institutions and experts, facilitating meaningful connections and helping transform relationships into experiences that support each event’s goals.

An example of the campaign’s experiential possibilities, Innovation

Through History features a conversation with a Smithsonian expert and uses the institution’s collections and history to explore how America has evolved through innovation and what today’s leaders can learn from successes and failures of the past.

“Meeting organizers are looking for ways to make their programs

more relevant and memorable without making them more complicated,” said Melissa A. Riley, Sr. Vice President of Convention Sales and Services at Destination DC. “Meetings Capitalized gives them a starting point and complements their core meeting program. We can help identify the right people, places and experiences in DC and connect them to what the meeting is trying to accomplish, ultimately impacting their success in Washington, DC.”

Find more information [here](#).



Destination DC’s Elliott L. Ferguson II, President & CEO, and Melissa Riley, SVP, Convention Sales & Services, speak during an IMEX America press conference at Mandalay Bay, Las Vegas.

Isaias

continued from page 1

of Cruisin’ the Coast.”

This year, the event was scheduled for October 3–10, and Hurricane Isaias made landfall on October 9. In the aftermath, thousands were without power across several states, and six deaths have been confirmed by officials.

With weather forecasts predicting that Hurricane Isaias’ path could potentially hit Mississippi’s Gulf Coast, some attendees of the CTC—especially those who had traveled to the event in RVs—were concerned about safety.

“This year, we had Hurricane Isaias,” Hornsby said. “We were in the zone of uncertainty at one time, and so there were some people that did depart early Wednesday or Thursday, rather than staying for the entire time.”

While the festival was in the zone of

uncertainty, Hornsby said the MHLA remained in contact with members who continuously shared “what they were hearing from their guests at the hotels.”

Overall, Hornsby said the event was “just a huge, huge success” and noted that Hurricane Isaias “did not shut us down at all.”

The event had 10,700 registrants, Hornsby said, despite some cautious cancellations and the early departures of registrants in RVs. The event also attracts a strong population of spectators who don’t register, and Hornsby estimated that somewhere around 30% of their attendance was impacted by Hurricane Isaias’ potential landfall along festival sites.

“It turned out that it went east of us, and so it was beautiful weather here, so it was beautiful weather here,” Hornsby said.

Industry Movers



Steve Smith has been appointed CEO of the Airforwarders Association (AFA). Smith brings more than 25 years of leadership experience spanning aviation, logistics, and humanitarian response. He spent 13 years as president & CEO of Airlink, and held a senior commercial role with Rolls-Royce Civil Aerospace. He is succeeding Brandon Fried, who is retiring at the end of the year after more than two decades of leadership.



Rob Brandenburg has been appointed General Manager of Populus Seattle. Brandenburg brings more than two decades experience to the post. Raised and classically trained in Switzerland with a background in pastry and French cuisine, Brandenburg's hospitality career has spanned Zurich, New York and San Francisco. Most recently, Brandenburg served as general manager of 1 Hotel Seattle, leading the property through its rebranding under the 1 Hotels brand.



Faryn Lerner is now Visit Tampa Bay's National Account Director. She will focus on conventions and business events for clients in the Northeast, West, and Canada. A Tampa-native, Lerner recently was complex sales manager at Claremont Companies, representing the Hampton Inn and Home2 Suites Tampa Channel District. Beyond hotels, Lerner spent two years as an Events Coordinator with One Heart for Women and Children, an Orlando-based nonprofit.



Hubert Bazan is now the Spa Director of Albert Hotel in Fredericksburg, Texas. Bazan brings more than two decades of experience in luxury spa operations across resort and urban hotel environments. Most recently, he was spa director at Mokara Hotel & Spa in San Antonio, Texas, where he led a team of more than 50. He worked at Omni Hotels & Resorts in Houston and Oklahoma City.

[See more Industry Movers](#)

Judge Dismisses former CVA Leader's Defamation Lawsuit *Complaint Targeted Mayor of Indiana Town*

By Jonathan Trager

A Judge in Lake County, Indiana, has dismissed a defamation lawsuit filed by Speros Batistatos, former CEO of the South Shore Convention and Visitors Authority, against Hammond Mayor Thomas McDermott over podcast comments McDermott made about his management, compensation, and spending.

Lake Superior Court Judge Thomas Hallett granted summary judgment on October 7, finding that McDermott and his podcast co-host, Hammond Corporation Attorney Kevin Smith, had a reasonable basis in law and fact for their statements, according to the *Post-Tribune* of Northwest Indiana.

Batistatos, who was terminated as head of the destination organization in 2022, filed the lawsuit in August 2025 over comments the two men made on McDermott's "Left of Center" podcast. The dispute followed years of conflict between McDermott and Batistatos, whose leadership of the regional tourism agency drew sharp criticism from the mayor.

Hallett found that the defendants had a reasonable basis for discussing Batistatos' management of the authority's board, that statements about Batistatos' compensation were supported by public records

and news reports comparing his earnings with those of local mayors, and that the discussion of Batistatos' spending was supported by corporate credit card statements available as public records.

McDermott and Smith used terms such as "shady," "crook" and "corrupt" to describe Batistatos. Hallett acknowledged the remarks were objectionable but ruled they weren't illegal.

"These types of remarks are certainly obnoxious, and one could argue they have no place in our political discourse," Hallett wrote. "Unfortunately, they are all too common and are not defamatory per se."

McDermott said in a social media post that he would ask the court to order Batistatos to reimburse the costs of defending the lawsuit, which he characterized as "frivolous."

In a statement reported by the *Post-Tribune*, Batistatos said he was disappointed by the decision but respected the court and judicial process. He maintained that there's a difference between protected opinion and false assertions of fact and said he'd consult with his attorneys about his next steps regarding the ruling, which can be appealed.

A separate lawsuit against the authority and several board members over Batistatos' 2022 termination remains unresolved.

Yancey Burgess Joins ASAE as Vice President of Marketing Strategy

By Todd McElwee

Set to lead integrated marketing for ASAE's flagship events, educational programs, products and strategic initiatives, Yancey Burgess has joined the organization as its Vice President of Marketing Strategy.

Burgess arrives from SHRM (Society for Human Resource Management), where he served as Vice President of B2B2C Marketing and Integrated Content.

"Great marketing is a promise that what we're offering is worth someone's time," said Burgess. "Association professionals give ASAE their trust, their attention and their ambition. My job is to make sure everything we put in front of them earns it."

Reporting to Marc Anderson, Managing Director of ASAE Business Solutions, Burgess will work across the organization to translate business priorities into personalized, audience-centered campaigns that strengthen engagement, participation, brand value and revenue growth. Responsibilities will include brand stewardship, digital marketing and analytics, and leadership of the marketing team and agency partners.

"As ASAE brings our new strategic framework to life, connecting our community with the opportunities and resources that matter most is essential," said Michelle Mason, FASAE, CAE, AAiP, President & CEO, ASAE. "Yancey



brings a powerful combination of strategic vision, collaborative leadership and a focus on measurable results. Just as important is a commitment to investing in people and building strong partnerships across teams."

At SHRM, Burgess helped transform siloed marketing efforts into an integrated approach centered on the audience journey, supporting membership, products, partnerships and events, ASAE said. His experience includes leading member acquisition and retention strategies, strengthening lifetime value, and directing go-to-market efforts for major conferences and flagship programs.

ASAE noted the appointment supports a commitment to delivering a more connected member experience and strengthening its capacity to serve the association community.

NEWS

Around Associations

GBTA Foundation Announces 2026 WINiT Top 50 Honorees in Business Travel...

The GBTA Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the Global Business Travel Association (GBTA), recently named its 2026 WINiT Top 50. The honor recognizes leaders organizers say are corporate champions elevating and celebrating women as well as those who are rising talent in the business travel and meetings sector.

Honorees were recognized in five categories: Women Innovating the Way We Travel, Global Leaders with Global Impact, Rising Female Leaders, FollowHer: Legends in the Industry and Allies in Action: Champions of Change. They represent 36 companies, 16 countries and five continents. WINiT has recently expanded recently to a 1,200-member global community with 40% of the 2026 Top 50 nominations coming from outside the United States.

"The 2026 WINiT Top 50 reflects

the extraordinary breadth of talent, leadership and allyship shaping business travel around the world," said Bev Heinritz, Director, Foundation Programs at the GBTA Foundation. "These honorees are not only achieving excellence in their own careers; they are opening doors, creating opportunities and inspiring the next generation of leaders across our industry."

Heinritz added that each of this year's Top 50 will receive 50,000 AAdvantage miles, made possible by American Airlines, as a token of appreciation for their efforts to build a more inclusive future in the business travel industry.

The WINiT Top 50 honorees will be recognized at the 2026 GBTA WINiT Summit on October 27 in Dallas.

Find more information [here](#).

NBAA Presenting Dr. Tony Kern Professionalism in Aviation Award to Eight Leaders...

The National Business Aviation Association (NBAA)

will bestow its 2026 Dr. Tony Kern Professionalism in Aviation Award upon eight individuals it said exemplifies the highest standards of professionalism and leadership in support of business aviation safety.

This year's recipients: Todd Buczek, WYVERN; Michael Cataldo, Cox Enterprises, Inc.; James Kelly, Pfizer (retired); Hall Lewallen, Advanced Aircrew Academy; Stuart Rogerson, Textron Aviation; David Strassburg, Bombardier; Jason Vanis, Jet Linx Aviation; and Madeline Young, Polaris Aero.

"These eight individuals represent the very best of what it means to be a professional in business aviation," said NBAA Director, Safety and Flight Operations Mark Larsen, CAM. "Their commitment to safety, willingness to mentor others and dedication to doing the job right embody the legacy of Dr. Tony Kern and set the standard for the industry."

First awarded in 2016, the Profes-

sionalism in Aviation Award honors U.S. Air Force veteran and Convergent Performance co-founder Dr. Kern, who has authored 10 books on human performance.

MPI Potomac Holding Education Day...

On October 26, MPI's Potomac Chapter will hold its Education Day in Washington, D.C., at the Kellogg Conference Hotel Capitol Hill at Gallaudet University. The session, Forward Together: High-Touch, Inclusive Hospitality in a High-Tech World, will look at the balance of technology and human interaction in the meetings industry.

"In an era driven by artificial intelligence and rapid technological advancement, the core of the events industry remains beautifully unchanged: human connection," the chapter said. "How do we harness the power of digital tools while fiercely protecting the warmth, empathy, and humanity of hospitality?"

Find more information [here](#).

CVB Update

The Visit Chicago Southland (VCS) Annual Meeting & Awards Luncheon on October 8 at Wind Creek Chicago Southland Casino & Resort joined legislators, village leaders, business owners, and hospitality leaders to celebrate the VCS 40-year anniversary and discuss the prior year's tourism achievements.

"Cheers to 40 Years: Celebrating Four Decades of Progress" reflected on the history of Visit Chicago Southland and its sales and marketing evolution through a more digital age. Speakers included Visit Chicago Southland President & CEO Mary Patchin, Village of East Hazel Crest

Mayor Thomas Brown, Village of Homewood Mayor Rich Hofeld, Wind Creek Chicago Southland Casino & Resort Executive Vice President & General Manager Jahnae Erpenbach, and Visit Chicago Southland Board Chair and La Banque Hotel Chief Financial Officer Jodi Kennedy.

The keynote speaker was Illinois Humanities Executive Director Gabrielle Lyon, who addressed the programs and effects of America Illinois 250, which she led. "Bringing together so many people responsible for the continued success and growth of Chicago Southland tourism and hospitality

was awe-inspiring," said Patchin. "This annual meeting reinforced the value of tourism in our region and recognized countless individuals who have and continue to be instrumental."

Visit Denver on October 13 announced new enhancements to its Mile High 5 Incentive program.

The program, which was launched in 2024, is available to meeting planners nationwide and is designed with them in mind to help book new meetings and create memorable events while enjoying exceptional

value and outstanding hospitality.

Planners with groups 100 to 950 rooms on peak, can now select five valuable hotel concessions and receive up to \$500 in airfare reimbursement for an approved site visit to experience Denver firsthand and discover how the Mile High City can deliver the best meeting experience.

To get started, planners are encouraged to share new 2027 RFPs with the Visit Denver team. The program has an October 12, 2026, through June 30, 2027, lead eligibility period. Find more information [here](#).



Representatives from the Cordish Companies and Bruce Smith Enterprise celebrated the topping out of the forthcoming Live! Casino & Hotel Virginia in Petersburg in early October. Officials gathered to sign the final construction beam before it was hoisted to its final position.

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Scene at Historic Hotels of America Conference



Photos Courtesy of Historic Hotels of America and Historic Hotels Worldwide

The Destination That Fills the Room

A full room starts long before the opening session.

But in Savannah, we've seen what happens when those doors open. In September 2026, the International Veterinary Emergency & Critical Care Symposium welcomed 5,509 attendees and exhibitors, becoming the largest convention by attendance ever held in the city.

For association executives, numbers like these mean more than a head count. Attendance is registration revenue, member engagement, and one of the clearest measures of an annual meeting's success. Programming gives members a reason to attend, but the right destination can give them so much more.

That's where Savannah earns its place on the agenda.

And the appeal doesn't have to end with the closing session. When an annual meeting becomes an excuse to finally experience a city they've longed to visit, attendees may bring someone along or give themselves an extra day or two to explore.

Plenty of Room for the Main Event



Of course, a destination people want to visit still has to deliver when it's time to get down to business.

The Savannah Convention Center spans 660,000 square feet, including 200,000 square feet of exhibit space, a new 40,000-square-foot ballroom complementing the existing 25,000-square-foot ballroom and 27 meeting rooms.

Its waterfront location puts large-scale programs across the Savannah River from downtown, and the commute comes with a great view along the way. Complimentary Savannah Belles Ferries carry passengers between both sides, giving groups a memorable way to move from general sessions and exhibit halls to whatever comes next.

Back downtown, hotels sit within easy reach of one another, while Savannah's pedestrian-friendly Historic Landmark District keeps restaurants, gathering places and after-hours plans close at hand. The city's squares and riverfront also give planners distinctive settings to take receptions, networking and other offsite events beyond the ballroom.

Between the ferries, compact

downtown footprint and transportation options available for groups, getting from one part of the program to another doesn't have to become an event of its own.

Let Your Hair Down

The speaker has spoken and the session is done. So now what? In Savannah, it's time to ditch the badge, loosen the tie, and let your hair down.

The city comes alive before and after five, with plenty of ways for attendees to make the evening their own. River Street brings dining, local shopping and rooftop bars together along the waterfront, while walking tours offer everything from food and history to paranormal discovery and lively pub crawls. Museums, historic house tours, and centuries of architecture reward those with more time to explore.

Then there's Savannah after dark. The squares take on a quiet magic beneath the moss, while speakeasies set the mood with plush seating, closely gathered tables and specialty cocktails made for lingering longer.

For attendees, the hardest part may be deciding what to do first. For planners, Savannah eases the

pressure of creating a memorable evening—the city already knows how to show them a good time.

There's More on the Horizon

The next chapter is already taking shape.

Opening in 2028, Signia by Hilton Savannah will add 444 guestrooms and 38,000 square feet of meeting space with a direct connection to the Savannah Convention Center. Alongside the Westin Savannah Harbor Golf Resort & Spa, the new headquarters hotel will give future groups even more options on the riverfront.

Those future dates are closer than you think. Savannah is already welcoming bookings for larger groups from 2028 to 2032, so this is the perfect moment for forward-thinking association leaders to begin the conversation.

Imagine your annual meeting with the perfect dates, inspiring speakers, and an agenda brimming with can't-miss moments. Host it in a city your members have been dreaming of, and you have just given them the ultimate reason to attend.

Pick the city they'll show up for. Let Savannah take it from [here](#).





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