



Photos by Brittany Murray Staff Photographer

The Green Room, left, at the Long Beach Convention Center features artwork of such performers as Elvis Presley who have played at the venue. Renovations at the Convention Center include new restrooms, center. The Terrace Theater, right, has been given additional seats.

Building for the future of LB

Downtown hotels, Convention Center try to keep visitors happy

By Kristopher Hanson Staff Writer

LONG BEACH — Three of the city's largest hotels and the Convention Center have budgeted millions of dollars in upgrades this year to accommodate growing tourism and convention business.

Between January and July, daily occupancy in city hotels was up 8.3 percent, while average room rates were up 4.5 percent and revenue per room, an important indicator of economic health in the hospitality industry, was up 13.3 percent, according to PFK Consulting.

The numbers outpace national averages and indicate the city's tourism and convention industry is recovering steadily from a rough 2009-2010, when, as the economy crumbled, businesses pulled out of conventions, despite steep cancellation fees and plunging rates.

"We're doing really well, but people's tastes and needs are changing; they're looking at unique design, convenience, more modernity," said Steve Goodling, president and CEO of the Long Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"We're looking at what the hotels are doing, visiting with them, watching the transformation of downtown's public spaces, and we want to integrate the Convention Center into the overall vision. It's the only way we're going to remain competitive in a very competitive environment."

Goodling pointed to nearby convention cities such as Los Angeles and Anaheim, who are also lobbying hard for the same corporate, association and nonprofit conventioners.

In 2010, Long Beach's Convention Center handled 1.6 million people, a figure roughly the same as recent years, even as other cities saw convention business nose-dive amid the recession.

Occupancy rates in Long Beach are also above regional and national averages.

A report by Str Global, a hotel tracking firm, noted that the national occupancy rate is roughly 63.8 percent, while in Long Beach, the rate averages 73.5 percent.

Nusrat Mirza, general manager of the Renaissance Hotel downtown, said business has picked up significantly since the "bad years" of 2009 and 2010.

In the past two years, the hotel has poured \$13 million into a total refurbishing of the lobby and upgrades to rooms, restaurants, bathrooms and lighting.

"What we did, and what customers wanted, are little areas, chairs and pods, tables and couches where they can eat, talk, network, use their (mobile devices) or just relax," Mirza, a longtime hotel executive, said about the makeover. "That's where people are heading. Modern spaces. Comfort. Multi-use."

Next door to the hotel is the Long Beach Transit Mall, which with its adjoining promenade just underwent a \$9 million renovation that included the building of a new park and bike station.

The CVB estimates that visitors to Long Beach will generate up to \$16 million this year in hotel bed taxes, half of which goes into the city's general

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The Long Beach Convention Center is undergoing an upgrade, including the addition of new furniture, restrooms and meeting spaces. The carpet will be replaced in the fall.

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fund under the city charter.

The general fund pays for police and fire protection, libraries and most other basic services.

The remainder of the bed tax is used for the sale and promotion of the city. They've attracted numerous high-profile conventions in recent years, including the California Women's Conference and Technology, Entertainment and Design (TED) Conference.

The revenue estimate doesn't include sales taxes and other revenue from visitors, which CVB executives believe runs into the tens of millions per month, supporting jobs.

And to drum up additional business, the CVB employs representatives in Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Chicago, Houston and Sacramento.

Those workers have secured more than a dozen major conventions for the city through 2013, a group expected to bring more than 65,000 room nights to local

hotels.

They include the American Association of Petroleum Geologists, expected to bring 8,900 conventioners in early 2012, and the National Center for State Courts, which has booked 5,570 room nights this year.

Those numbers don't include the dozens of smaller conventions in town every week, like the Special Advertising Association meeting in late August.

The group has met in Long Beach for 12 years, and Executive Director Nancy Phillips said she's noticed tremendous changes to the city in that time.

"The reason we keep coming back to Long Beach is because it's very easy to get around. You don't need to rent a car or take taxis everywhere and the Convention Center is perfect for our needs," Phillips explained. "And the ongoing renovations have made this place better and better, not only here where we meet but downtown."

Goodling said the upcoming renovations are the first in a series of planned upgrades for the Convention Center. They

race Theatre and Long Beach Arena.

Already completed is a solar "flower" outside the Convention Center entrance, with four panels where guests can sit and plug in their electrical devices. It generates 1.2 kilowatt hours of energy per day and powers lights at night.

Planners would like to build a pedestrian bridge from near Pine Avenue and Seaside Way to the arena's entrance, though funding remains an issue.

The three venues are largely funded by the Tideland Fund, which generates money from marina leases, beachfront property and a revenue-sharing agreement with the Port of Long Beach.

"The dollars going into our downtown are making more than a good return on investment," Goodling said. "We estimate that every dollar put into the CVB advertising fund results in a return of \$3.70. Multiply that by millions, and you have (through tourism and travel) one of the city's biggest sources of employment, tax revenue and pride."

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