

Business

Conventions and tourism mean big bucks for the region

TOM SADOWSKI
Special to The Daily Record
September 5, 2008

It has been praised for being the missing piece of the downtown Baltimore puzzle and for spurring Greater Baltimore's convention business to new heights. One thing is for certain — the opening of the new \$301 million Hilton Convention Center Hotel across from Oriole Park finally gives Baltimore the convention headquarters hotel that meeting planners have been demanding for so long.

In sheer numbers alone, the new hotel will have a major impact on Greater Baltimore's convention business. With 757 rooms, it increases by a third the number of hotel rooms immediately adjacent to the Baltimore Convention Center.

The hotel also has brought more than 400 new jobs to the area, while its arrival on the scene has prompted hotels in the surrounding area to spend more than \$100 million in renovations to be more competitive.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg. According to the Baltimore Area Convention and Visitors Association (BACVA), the region is experiencing a marked increase in room nights — a fact it attributes, at least in part, to the new Hilton. Through June 30, BACVA reports 451,608 room nights in city hotels, an 18 percent jump from where bookings stood just a year ago.

Major conventions coming to town

The Convention Center is also experiencing a boost from major associations which have bypassed Baltimore in the past because it did not have a convention center hotel. The U.S. Conference of Mayors, for example, is planning a five-day event in Baltimore for June 2011. This would be the first time that this organization has visited Baltimore.

The same holds true for the Industrial Fabric Association International, which booked 5,520 room nights for its convention in Baltimore in October 2011. Other major conventions undoubtedly will follow.

Even smaller conventions, such as Tradeshow Week's Fastest 50, will have a huge impact. The convention, dubbed the "Academy Awards" of the tradeshow industry, will expose industry executives who plan hundreds, if not thousands, of tradeshows annually to Baltimore for four days this November. In the words of BACVA CEO Tom Noonan, "The impact of this one event could be felt for years to come in future business."

And that is precisely the point. The new Hilton opens the door for large conventions which, in the past, would have passed on Baltimore. Bringing those kinds of conventions here obviously can give a tremendous boost to the regional economy. According to a recent study by The Sage Policy Group, the Convention Center has an annual economic impact of nearly \$1 billion on Maryland, and that's before the addition of the new Hilton.

Increased hotel development

Beyond the Hilton and the renovations to nearby hotels in the city, though, the region as a whole is seeing a marked increase in hotel development in response to rising demand. Anne Arundel County, for example, has 13 hotels in the proposal or permitting phase that will add some 2,153 rooms to the county's inventory. Since 2006, eight hotels have opened there, adding another 1,460 rooms.

In Harford County, Aberdeen has a 100-room Hilton Garden Inn under construction, with construction starting soon on a 100-room Hampton Inn. Not to be outdone, Bel Air has a Candlewood Suites under construction, while a new 64-room La Quinta Inn & Suites opened in Edgewood in March of this year. A 77-room Comfort Inn in Joppa is currently going through the county's development advisory process.

Cecil County is also seeing an increase in activity, highlighted by the recent completion of an \$800,000 renovation to the Granite and Lace Bed and Breakfast in Port Deposit. That structure, built in the 1850s, has been remade into a high-end facility with conference rooms, meeting spaces, etc.

The Ramada Inn at Perryville and the Comfort Inn and Suites in North East have undergone similar major renovations. In addition, four new hotels have opened in North East and Elkton over the past few years.

Drawing praise

Obviously, all of this activity translates into more dollars coming into the region and a significant boost to the Greater Baltimore economy. But beyond dollars and cents, more individuals nationally are being exposed to all of the outstanding visitor attractions that Greater Baltimore has to offer.

Baltimore has already drawn national and international praise as a great place to visit. Frommers ranked Baltimore among its "Top 10 Destinations for Summer Travel." MSNBC's Sherman's Travel placed Baltimore first in its list of "Top 10 Underrated U.S. Cities," hinting that we are just starting to realize our potential as a tourist destination.

When you add all of that to the region's vibrant arts and culture scene (an AmericanStyle Magazine readers poll ranked the area seventh among its top 10 arts destinations), the countless area festival and sporting events (including Preakness, Artscape and the AST Dew Tour), and a myriad of recreational opportunities from boating and fishing to golf, it's easy to see why Greater Baltimore is rapidly moving into the upper echelons as a convention and visitor destination.

Tom Sadowski is president & CEO, interim, of the Economic Alliance of Greater Baltimore. He can be reached at jtsadowski@greaterbaltimore.org.