



ON THE REBOUND

In the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic, meetings and conventions are on the rise.

“COVID’s not something we talk much about anymore, but it’s always in the back of our minds,” says Chelsea Andujar, director of meetings and events for the Carolinas Association of General Contractors.

Four years ago, the hospitality sector was reeling from the devastating impacts of pandemic shutdowns, but many used the down time to make cosmetic improvements and infrastructure upgrades, and create opportunities for unique conference experiences.

While the pandemic is largely in the rearview mirror, a few

stubborn challenges remain, including workforce shortages and inflation. Yet, planners and industry representatives report conference attendance is on the rise and business is bouncing back.

Carolinas AGC, a Charlotte-based trade association that represents construction and contractor firms in North and South Carolina, organizes over 100 meetings and conventions of all sizes each year, topping out with an annual summit that brings in as many as 800 attendees.

For Andujar, life and work are getting back to normal, and while staffing is still a concern, she

recognizes that meeting facilities are striving to serve their clients.

“We have been happily surprised at how the properties have risen to the occasion,” she says. “During our first large summit after the pandemic, our largest dinner event was for over 500 people, and the hotel not only brought in all its staff but recruited their family members to help with banquet service and fill in the gaps.”

Andujar can relate to the staffing struggles. Her association’s members are dealing with the same challenges.

“We’ve had to put our patience hats on and understand we all have



a workforce shortage," she says.

Rich Phaneuf, CEO and executive director of Association Executives of North Carolina has been on both sides of the event management business. Today, he runs the state organization for business and trade associations and supports the organization's hospitality partners. Prior to joining AENC, he was general manager of River Landing Companies in Wallace, overseeing a country club and a hotel, hosting 850 events a year and managing a workforce of 250 employees.

While the state's hospitality workforce isn't fully at peak, Phaneuf notes progress is being made.

"During the COVID era, we saw a lot of folks in the hospitality industry leaving to pursue other lines of work, and even though staffing is rebounding, we're facing workforce issues today that we haven't faced before," he says.

The biggest challenges lie in hiring workers who are well-trained and paying them the wages they require and the flexibility they need, he adds.

AENC spent its 2024 summer convention at Harrah's Cherokee Casino Resort in the North Carolina mountains, one of the largest resorts and casino operations in the state.

In 2021, the resort unveiled a multimillion-dollar expansion project, adding a new hotel tower and a 83,000 square-foot convention center. Today, the facility offers over 115,700 square feet of event space and 1,833 hotel rooms.

State association business has always been the resort's bread and butter, says sales manager Stacy Pegg, who remembers when the facility was just a fraction of its current size.

"We built our convention center on association business," she says. "For years, all we had was a 14,000-square-foot ballroom and a 16,000-square-foot event center." The convention business started with the N.C. Association of Chiefs of Police, which was our first big association booking, and once they started coming, everybody started coming and it has been a great market for us."

The resort's sister property, Harrah's Cherokee Valley River Casino & Hotel in Murphy is currently undergoing a \$275 million expansion project expected to be completed this year.

The Harrah's resorts are now approaching pre-pandemic levels and the future is bright, says Michelle Patterson director of sales for the portfolio division of Caesar's Entertainment, which owns the Harrah's resorts.

"Cherokee is trending higher over the next several years," she said. "With the additional meeting space, the team there is putting more business on the books than the same time last year, and the next three years are shaping up to be the best we've ever had."

In 2021, the Charlotte Convention Center opened the doors to its \$126.9 million expansion project, which added 50,000 square feet of meeting room and pre-function space. The convention center today offers 600,000 square feet of total leasable space.

The investment is paying off for the 25-year-old convention center according to the Charlotte Regional Visitors Authority, which operates the facility. The CRVA's annual report shows that in 2023, the convention center hosted 374 events with



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413,000 attendees, including 42 conventions and trade shows, 19 consumer shows and 297 local events.

Charlotte is a strong draw for visitors, particularly those driving to the Queen City, says Sherri Belfield, senior public relations manager.

"The drive market still reigns supreme," she says. "Nine in 10 visitors arrive in Charlotte by car, and we focus on a 400-mile radius targeting visitors coming for concerts, performances, festivals and sporting events."

She adds that Charlotte ranks high among meeting planners as a convention destination.

"This points to the positive reputation Charlotte has among planners and conference-goers and how that perception continues to translate into bookings," she said.

In Raleigh and across Wake County, business is also booming, says Dennis Edwards, president and CEO of Visit Raleigh, the capital city's convention bureau.

"Leads for corporate meetings and conventions are up by 25% over last year, and bookings are up by 24%," he says.

Edwards welcomes the scheduled \$387.5 million expansion of the Raleigh Convention Center which he believes will be a boon to the city and a welcome addition for the meetings sector.

The expansion will add 300,000 square feet of meeting space to the convention center, bringing its total to 800,000. Edwards hopes this expansion will help recoup lost revenues due to the lack of capacity.