

Meet Minneapolis president Melvin Tennant talks with BTN VP of content Elizabeth West about ICE occupation, impact on the meetings and travel industry and how the city's hospitality infrastructure is responding.

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Meet Minneapolis president Melvin Tennant speaks at the organization's 2025 annual meeting. *Source: Meet Minneapolis*

In the wake of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement shootings of Minneapolis residents Alex Pretti on Jan. 24 and Renee Good on Jan. 7, Melvin Tennant, president of Meet Minneapolis, the city's convention and visitors bureau, sat down with BTN VP of content Elizabeth West to discuss the impact on the industry of the violence, ongoing media coverage and canceled meetings and business travel to the city. While he talked about some numbers, he was more focused on the effect of lost business on workers and the efforts it has taken to keep winter-months business on the calendar.

Despite the political tensions, protests and violence unfolding on the ground in the city, January has been a strong month for meetings and events. The Minneapolis Convention Center has welcomed the Twin Cities Auto Show, Minnesota School Boards Association meetings, the Minneapolis Boat Show and the Totally Rad Vintage

According to Meet Minneapolis figures, which are sourced from social data firm STR, Minneapolis saw a 37 percent increase in occupancy was 36.1 percent, 37 percent above the same period last year. The week ending Jan. 17, however, realized occupancy at just 33 percent, which was down 11 percent from the same week last year. In the most recent data available, for the week ending Jan. 24, occupancy was down just over 3 percent.

There are many factors impacting hotel occupancy rates in the city, not the least of which could be ICE presence itself filling rooms. As happened when ICE agents were deployed to Los Angeles in June 2025, hotels have been the site of protests in Minneapolis. At least one "No Sleep for ICE" protest, which targets hotels that house ICE agents with late-night noise campaigns, ended in armed agents releasing chemical irritants to disperse reportedly belligerent protestors at a Hilton Home2 Suites in downtown Minneapolis this week.

Media presence in the city is another new variable in the mix, but it should be noted that the Meet Minneapolis numbers cover only 47 hotels in the city proper. Meet Minneapolis figures do not include the surrounding area and, therefore, may not capture the entire picture. Metro-area numbers provided to BTN by STR showed stronger occupancy rates.

It remains to be seen how the ongoing occupation, extreme political rhetoric and Pretti's death at the hands of ICE agents will affect the industry. Two business travel-related firms—World Travel Protect, a dedicated risk management agency, and TravelPoolEurope, a European member-owned travel management collective—each said their clients were asking for increased guidance for cities where ICE presence is active or avoiding travel there. If travel is required, according to the risk firm, some clients are opting for day trips when possible, avoiding overnight stays.

Meetings sourcing technology firm Cvent provided BTN with search and booking numbers for Minneapolis for the month of January. As Meet Minneapolis officials discussed, events held in January were strong year over year: proposal volume realized for events in January was up 11 percent over last year, room nights up 9 percent and value was up 13 percent. Those numbers capture a broader view than events associated with convention center. However, meeting sourcing activities in the month of January that include Minneapolis are mixed to slightly down. RFP volume is up 2 percent, but room nights associated with those proposed events are down 2 percent, and the total value of those RFPs is down 6 percent from proposal values in play last year. Still, those numbers would not be out of range for normal year-over-year variations.

Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey is on the board of Meet Minneapolis. His **fiery responses** to the Trump Administration and Department of Homeland Security have made news headlines across the nation.

With all that as a backdrop, the following is an edited transcript of Tennant's conversation with BTN.

BTN: Please tell me how you are doing and how Meet Minneapolis, the board and staff are holding up in the aftermath of the ICE killings of Alex Pretti and Renee Good?

Probably the one thing that I've seen most prominently is our team wanting to help friends and neighbors, our board members and business owners. We have a board member who's a restaurateur [who has been out] delivering egg rolls to one of the police department precincts. And that's just one example of a bigger thing you don't want to forget. In the whole midst of this sociopolitical issue, it's the human side. These are humans and everybody is a human. It's difficult for a city like ours in the crosshairs of this sociopolitical issue. We don't always have control over it, we don't know from day to day how this going to play out.

BTN: Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, among other city officials, is on the Meet Minneapolis board of directors. Does the organization have its own viewpoint of ICE's work and the protests that have flared in its wake?

Tennant: We're very much aligned with what the city has said, and that's not meant to be a cop-out. ... What I will say is that since we are dependent upon small businesses and many of the workers, we know that this is impacting our ability at times to provide the service to visitors that we'd like, but I am so proud of the way that, in particular, our hospitality community stayed focused on its keeping the promises Meet Minneapolis makes. Because of course, you know, as a destination organization, we don't have hotel rooms to sell or restaurant seats to fill, so we have to rely on those partners. So we've been even more closely aligned with the businesses that we rely on to provide the visitor experience.

Yesterday we had our monthly hotel community meeting with directors of sales and general managers. We provided them with the latest information as we know it. We, of course, work with other business associations—our Chamber [of Commerce], our downtown council, our regional economic development organizations are all doing things that really focus on the human element, because that is what's at the core of this.

BTN: Meet Minneapolis has really keyed into the human element in its 10-year master plan that rolled out formally about a year ago. Among its six "big ideas" were two that focused on civil rights and social justice initiatives: 1) Embracing Minneapolis as a catalyst of the modern-day civil rights movement and 2) Developing an iconic event that showcases Minneapolis' commitment to social justice. It may be difficult to think about this now, but do initiatives like that feel threatened in any way? Do they become more important than ever?

Tennant: Our Destination Master Plan was approved by our board ... but it was a very thoughtful process wherein more than 2,000 people in the community—customers, members of media, businesses, a lot of individuals—funneled their thoughts and views into that plan. Keep in mind it was on the heels of the George Floyd being murdered in South Minneapolis on May 25, 2020. That was fresh on people's minds. But as an organization, we have always looked at equity and community impact as a priority. We have a department within our organization that focuses on that and will continue to do so.

Now, I do need to say that's a 10-year plan, so we haven't gotten to everything yet. The two areas where we are currently most excited about is presenting Minneapolis as the No. 1 city for women's sports and, secondly,

BTN: You bring up George Floyd's murder in 2020. That was clearly an inflection point for the city around which there was a recovery period and a need to lean into your customers' concerns. It seems that the media onslaught converging on this one slice of Minneapolis' current experience is very tough and will be something that Meet Minneapolis needs to overcome. How do you do that?

Tennant: We know there will have to be some messaging to share what the true story is. As an example, shortly after the George Floyd murder, we did a client event in Washington at the National Museum of African American History and Culture with 100 clients. We needed to remind them that the tragedy of George Floyd was not our whole story. That's part of it now, you know, but it doesn't end there. And we learned then that authenticity and transparency and telling customers what is really happening is the key. We used the event at the museum in a very effective way in my view.

We are again, now, in the position of being in the evening news across the country in a highly politicized story, and that's difficult to overcome. We are having individual, one-on-one conversations with groups that legitimately have questions. We don't have the resources, nor is it the time right now to launch the right messaging. But when it is, we have to show people that what they see in the media is not all of what's happening on the ground in our city. We'll do much of that on the leisure side, but ... for groups and conventions, we already have a number of familiarization trips scheduled around key events. We'll probably need to reshape those, but the opportunities are already in place to bring in key decision makers with potential business for the city.

BTN: I have statements from two sizeable organizations that indicate their clients are avoiding Minneapolis for business travel. I also was told two entities have cancelled their events at the convention center. What does that kind of attrition and avoidance mean for the Minneapolis economy?

Tennant: I'll talk about a few successes first. Right after the first of the year, the community in the metro area hosted the IIHF World Junior Hockey Championships. The events took place at a venue in Minneapolis, but the championship games were at a venue in St. Paul. But it was very successful. For the first time we moved our Twin Cities Auto show to that early January time frame, and they're happy with those results. We had the boat show and the Totally Rad Vintage Fest just this past weekend. We also had the Minnesota School Board Association. And, sidebar, one of their big topics was how school districts [respond] when ICE shows up. That contributed to attendance.

BTN: And the cancellations? The impact of those?

Tennant: Just to correct the information, we have had one event cancel and we are in talks with the other piece of business; they have not canceled. In normal years, we can host anywhere from 600 to 800 meetings, conferences and conventions. We haven't pulled together the number for 2025 yet, but in 2024 we had 760 total events, so that gives you a range. But January, as you can imagine for Minnesota, can be a challenging

The total impact from the one [canceled] event was, I believe, a little less than half a million [dollars]. So certainly nothing to sneeze at and we are glad to have only one cancellation so far. To focus, though, the impact of half a million-dollar losses on workers is real, and there are people who didn't get work hours they were expecting. That's very, very regrettable, and Meet Minneapolis is responsible for keeping the promises we make.

BTN: When I think about ICE activities and the cities where they are being deployed—Los Angeles, Chicago, Portland, Ore.—these are cities that the current administration didn't win in the election. While I don't think anyone is targeting the meetings and events industry, specifically, the by-product of these government activities does impact local economies, the ability to serve tourists and groups and how meeting planners may choose to source destinations for their events. So, in effect, deploying ICE may have the effect of steering meetings and event business away from cities like yours. You may or may not agree, but talk to me about the potential for that and what it could mean.

Tennant: Yeah. I'll just say that, like I mentioned earlier, the fact that we're in the crosshairs of this sociopolitical issue is certainly something we didn't ask for but it's a reality. We talk amongst destination marketing executives a lot about "what ifs" a lot. "What if" a certain occurrence happens in your city? We just don't know. We've seen travel politicized very, very heavily the last 10 to 15 years. We've seen how certain resort destinations might have been vilified or certain organizations calling for people not to go to certain cities or states because of a political stance on some issue. It's always out there.

Among destination executives, we know we could be next. We're all vulnerable because it's easy to politicize travel and travel is easily impacted by a situation like this and I don't wish it on anyone else. But I can't even tell you the number of notes of support I've gotten from my colleagues across the country. And I don't think anybody tries to profit from any issue that one particular city is having.

BTN: How are you communicating more generally and providing extra information to planners and event organizers who are looking to bring business to Minneapolis right now?

Tennant: [Our communications team] **updates our FAQs** multiple times daily and that's the best source of information. But we have a tremendous sales team that has great relationships with their clients and there are individual conversations taking place. We have a very, very close working relationship with our city government from communications to logistics for events. Even though we are not a city department, we are very plugged in and have dialogue all the time. Our convention center is a city department and we speak to the director at least daily. They rely on us for a lot of information and market intelligence. As far as policy decisions made, we're not involved, but anything that supports that from communications to logistics, we are deeply involved.