





SUNNY FORECAST FOR FORT LAUDERDALE'S MEETINGS BIZ

by Maria Lenhart / September 02, 2014

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Meet Sunny, Fort Lauderdale's new brand slogan, could also describe the destination's recent experience and future outlook regarding meeting and incentive business.

"The only word for what we're experiencing is exciting – we're delighted with the increased activity coming our way," said Christine Roberts-Tacione, vice president of convention sales for the Fort Lauderdale CVB.

"Our meetings business is up more than 20% over the same time last year."

Hotel occupancies are healthy, with properties in Broward County, which the CVB represents, averaging 81.4% occupancy so far this year, according to Smith Travel Research.

"Hotels in the convention center district are seeing occupancies of 88% and are doing well even in the summer," according to Roberts-Tacione.

Gearing up for PCMA

The next two years promise to continue on an upward swing, with new hotels on the horizon and a recent spate of hotel renovations that will present Fort Lauderdale at its best when PCMA's (Professional Convention Management Association) Education Conference comes to town in June 2015. The event is expected to draw up to 600 senior meeting planners.

"We've long enjoyed a strong partnership with PCMA, and this will be an important opportunity to bring these planners in to experience a new Fort Lauderdale," Roberts-Tacione said.

New hotels, new brands

Among upcoming developments is a new \$147 million, 349-room Margaritaville Resort, part of the Jimmy Buffet enterprise, set to open in July 2015.

The property, stretching for five acres along Hollywood's Boardwalk and the Intracoastal Waterway, will include 30,000 square feet of meeting space as well as several restaurants, multiple pools and a full-service spa.

Also on tap for next year is the 290-room Conrad Fort Lauderdale Resort and Residences set to open on Fort Lauderdale beach in a 24-story building with 15,000 square feet of meeting space, a pool and fine dining.

"These two properties are bringing in new brands for us and will give us an edge for meetings in different ways," said Roberts-Tacione.

"The Conrad will be ideal for small to mid-sized meetings, while Margaritaville will provide a fun, tropical atmosphere for groups in a range of sizes."

Another property in the works is the Costa Hollywood, a 304-room condo-hotel that will feature a retail shopping area, holistic spa and rooftop pool venue overlooking the ocean and the Intracoastal Waterway. It's scheduled to open in 2016.

In other hotel news, the Bonaventure Resort & Spa recently completed a renovation of its spa and function space and will wrap up a guest room redo later this year.

The B Ocean Fort Lauderdale was recently reflagged the Sonesta Fort Lauderdale and the former Schubert Resort, a boutique property, is now the Victoria Park Hotel.

Convention center plan

Broward County is developing a master plan for a new convention center hotel and an expansion of the Broward County Convention Center.

While no timeline or specific elements have been determined, Roberts-Tacione said there's reason to be optimistic about the project going forward.

"The fact that the county has hired a master planner for both a new hotel and convention center expansion and agrees with us that it's a priority is great news," she said.

"We've also completed a feasibility study that says we can support a new hotel of 750-1,000 hotel rooms as well as 100,000 square feet of exhibit space and a new ballroom."

Diverse business

In the meantime, the Fort Lauderdale area is drawing group business that is diverse as well as robust, attracting everything from corporate meetings and incentives to SMURF groups, according to Roberts-Tacione.

"Whether you're looking for a five-star property on the beach or a property near a park that's good for family reunions, we've got it," she said.

"Hotels in the convention center district get a lot of association business, including national and international associations in peak times and state and regional associations during the off-season."

Hotels along the beach draw incentive groups along with meetings in the legal, insurance and financial sectors, she added.

"In the western areas of the county, we have a lot to offer niche groups, including religious and fraternal organization as well as family reunions," said Roberts-Tacione.

"Plus we do a lot of sports-related group business near venues like the cricket stadium and the IceDen, an ice hockey arena."