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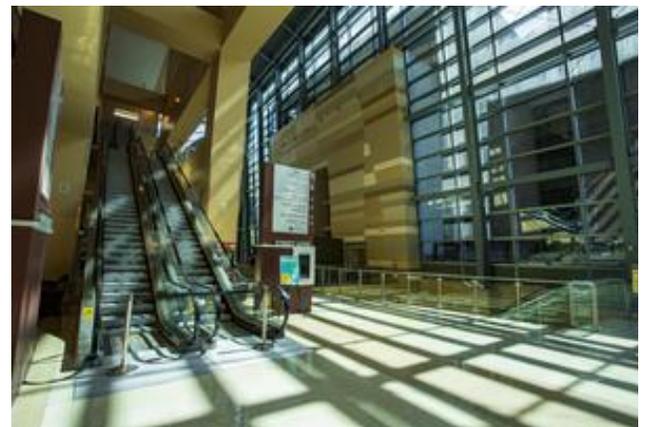
The big rebound: Phoenix Convention Center set for a busy summer

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“We are back!”

That is how Phoenix Mayor [Kate Gallego](#) kicked off a June 17 ceremony ahead of the first convention held at the city-owned Phoenix Convention Center since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Having a full-blown convention with hundreds of people flying into the Valley from across the country and staying at hotels in downtown Phoenix and eating at restaurants and bars, is something to celebrate, Gallego said.



JIM POULIN | PHOENIX BUSINESS JOURNAL

After being empty for more than a year, the Phoenix Convention Center has started holding large national conventions again.

The convention was held by the American Dental Hygienists' Association and was expected to bring in between 800 and 850 people to the city over the weekend.

"We have a great convention full of people from all across the country," Gallego said. "It is a group of people who care about safety and want to do it in a way that is responsible."

Gallego, along with other city officials and leadership from the ADHA, held a ribbon cutting ceremony to signify the beginning of the ADHA 2021 convention, as well as the Phoenix Convention Center's post-Covid-19 era.

The Phoenix Convention Center, which was the major driver of business for downtown Phoenix hotels and restaurants, sat empty for more than a year because of the pandemic, but as Covid-19 cases have slowed and more people are vaccinated, the convention center is set to have a busy summer.

Back-to-back bookings

"We are pretty much back-to-back-to-back until early August," said John Chan, the director of the Phoenix Convention Center. "Before this group is even finished, the National Sheriffs Association will be moving in for their convention. Then before they leave the Volleyball Festival starts unloading."

The Volleyball Festival has been held at the Convention Center before and it is expected to bring in around 5,000 attendees this year, said Jerry Harper, the deputy director of the Phoenix Convention Center.

Later in the summer, the Irish Dance Teachers Association of America and the American Legion will both hold large conventions in Phoenix.

"These are significant events, not just small meetings," Harper said.

The convention center, with the help of Visit Phoenix, which markets the convention center, usually is booking out events years in advance. But the pandemic threw off the 2020 calendar and other events in the future. Harper said there were a number of groups that canceled their events during the pandemic, but many of them canceled and then rebooked.

"There was a record number of bookings for future business in 2020," Harper said.

“While the pandemic was wreaking havoc on the industry, the sales teams were really busy continuing to book business for future years.”

Not just the rest of 2021, but Harper is expecting the Convention Center to be home to large events on a regular basis for the next few years. That will include NFL events leading up to the 2023 Super Bowl in Glendale, while the NCAA will be using Phoenix’s facilities before the Men’s Final Four in 2024 and the Women’s Final Four in 2026.

Extended impact

The return of conventions is a huge boon for downtown Phoenix hotels, restaurants and other businesses that rely on tourism and convention traffic. In the past two years, the three largest hotels in downtown Phoenix – Sheraton Phoenix Downtown, Hyatt Regency Phoenix and Renaissance Phoenix Downtown Hotel– all underwent multimillion-dollar renovations. Welcoming visitors back to their properties is a relief for those hotels.

The return of convention center business isn't just a win for established hotels, but for the new players in downtown Phoenix ready to get in on the action. The AC Hotel Phoenix Downtown opened in the February 2021 and a number of other hotels are currently being developed and constructed in downtown Phoenix.

A number of downtown Phoenix restaurants had to close under pressures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, but many other restaurant owners have decided to invest the money to open up in their place. Downtown Phoenix is on track to have more restaurants in 2021 than it did prior to the pandemic.

“Downtown Phoenix is prepared for this,” said Lorne Edwards, the senior vice president of sales and services for Visit Phoenix. “The amenity package has really improved from one year to the next.”

The money spent on hotels, food, entertainment and transportation is huge for the city of Phoenix and the area’s economy, but Mayor Gallego said the convention center actually plays an even broader indirect role in Phoenix’s economic future.

“Convention center is important for bringing visitors directly, but it is also, often, is a great introduction to the Valley,” Gallego said. “I’ve talked with several CEOs who first

came to Phoenix for a convention, they liked what they saw and they wanted to be part of our business community.”

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