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Convention centers open to challenge

*Metro Detroit adds venues, renovates, but rebound needed
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DEARBORN -- When Greenfield Village reopens June 10 following a \$60 million, eight-month renovation, the history park will offer numerous venues including a new 300-seat catering pavilion to host large conferences, exhibitions and corporate retreats.

But with the convention business in Metro Detroit struggling to regain its balance this year after a projected decline in 2002 and a dismal 2001, Greenfield Village faces a monumental challenge.

It's not alone. The same scenario confronts **Infinity** Yacht Charters in St. Clair Shores, which recently outfitted a 100-foot luxury yacht with more than \$300,000 in audio-visual equipment for hosting groups of 35 to 150 people.

Troy would like to add a meeting center at Interstate 75 and Big Beaver, the Novi Expo Center hopes to add space at a new location at Interstate 96 and Beck, while Cobo Center in Detroit is eyeing a 500,000-square-foot expansion.

One glimmer of hope: The convention business has shown signs of rebounding in the last few months, said Brad Van Dommelen, senior vice president of the Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau in Detroit. He said the new and expanded venues will actually generate more convention business.

"Any time you can offer national meeting planners new or enhanced venues, it shows our region is a dynamic destination," Van Dommelen said. "People are starting to hear Detroit is changing, and now we can show them the progress."

Nationally, convention and meeting traffic was down last year, according to a survey by Professional Convention Management Association, an industry trade group in Chicago.

In 2002, the average number of individual exhibitors reserving space in the largest expositions was 194, down nearly 10 percent from 2001. Also, the size of large expositions dropped 18 percent -- an average of nearly 81,000 square feet of space in 2002 compared with 98,750 square feet the year before.

Despite the bad news, Van Dommelen said the Detroit region is reaching the point that it can compete with venues such as Miami, Atlanta or St. Louis.

He cites recent additions like the \$1.2 billion Midfield Terminal at Detroit Metropolitan Airport in Romulus, the renovated Greenfield Village, two new sports stadiums, the three casinos, and the General Motors Corp. and Compuware Corp. headquarters projects.

JoLynn Cagle, president of the National Eligibility Workers Association, a 1,500-member group of human service administrators in Nixa, Mo., said she came away impressed after two recent visits to Detroit.

In 2007, her group will hold its annual conference for 500 people at the Marriott Hotel at the Renaissance Center.

"I've read a lot of bad things about Detroit, but my opinion about the city has really changed," Cagle said. "We were considering having our 2007 meeting in Miami, Orlando, Buffalo or Charlotte, but Detroit beat everyone."

Cagle credits Bureau-arranged trips to the Motown Museum in Detroit and other sites for closing the deal.

"We're also coming after the 2006 Super Bowl (in Detroit), so that will help us market the conference," she said. "We have a lot of women members, and Detroit proved out on safety as well."

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