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If We Build It, Will They Come?

Alisa Bailey, President and Chief Executive Officer
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Alisa L. Bailey serves as President and Chief Executive Officer of the Charleston Convention & Visitors Bureau, a position she has held since 2012. A native of Charleston and a senior public administrator with more than two decades in the tourism industry, Bailey served as President and Chief Executive Officer of the Virginia Tourism Corporation and was West Virginia's first female Tourism Commissioner and Bureau Chief of Commerce.

Despite the negative noise of problems facing our region, the Kanawha Valley is rising like a phoenix, investing in tourism infrastructure projects the likes of which have not been seen. As a tourism professional, it is heartening that governments are finally recognizing that public investment in tourism and changes in laws to enhance small businesses bring about a great return. This nod from the public sector bolsters confidence and gives the private sector encouragement to make business investments as well.

In no other region of the state has public and private investment in tourism been more prolific.

Since 2013, \$300 million in tourism infrastructure improvements has been infused into the Charleston area, including new and renovated hotels (three more are under renovation now); new independent restaurants, which now enjoy outdoor dining and Sunday alcohol service amenities; improvements at Yeager Airport; renovation of Haddad Riverfront Park and Magic Island; creation of bike lanes; new app-driven parking meters; \$10 million in improved exhibits at the Clay Center for the Arts and Sciences; \$18 million at the Shawnee Sports Complex; and the largest tourism project in the state – the \$110 million expansion and renovation at the Charleston Coliseum and Convention Center (CCCC).

That begs the question: If we build it, will they come?

Let's look at the CCCC. Millennials are now the largest generation, rapidly becoming the key decision makers for meeting and event locations. As meeting planners, they demand convention centers with exceptional technology – not only



connectivity but also superior audio-visual capabilities that allow for smartphone engagement. They demand local culture to be infused into their events, as they are more likely than other generations to blend business with pleasure and choose a destination with a rich arts, music and food scene. They demand interesting public spaces where they can check their smartphones, generally hang out and hold their networking functions. They demand social responsibility and, frankly, will not do business with brands that are not environmentally and socially progressive. The new convention center and the City of Charleston fit the bill.

The newly renovated CCCC has doubled its footprint, giving the Convention and Visitors Bureau's (CVB) sales team and CCCC staff many more opportunities to book business. Today, the CCCC boasts 300,000 square feet of expanded space, including a 25,000-square-foot ballroom, 31 breakout meeting rooms, a 13,000-seat spectator arena, and a 730-seat performing arts venue – all within walking distance of 1,600 hotel rooms, art and music venues. But that's only half the story of the CCCC.

ZMM Architects and Engineers, a Charleston-based architecture firm, helped city officials recapture the Elk River view with expansive glass pre-function space; ample outdoor areas with balconies, a patio, fire pits and a boat dock; and creative

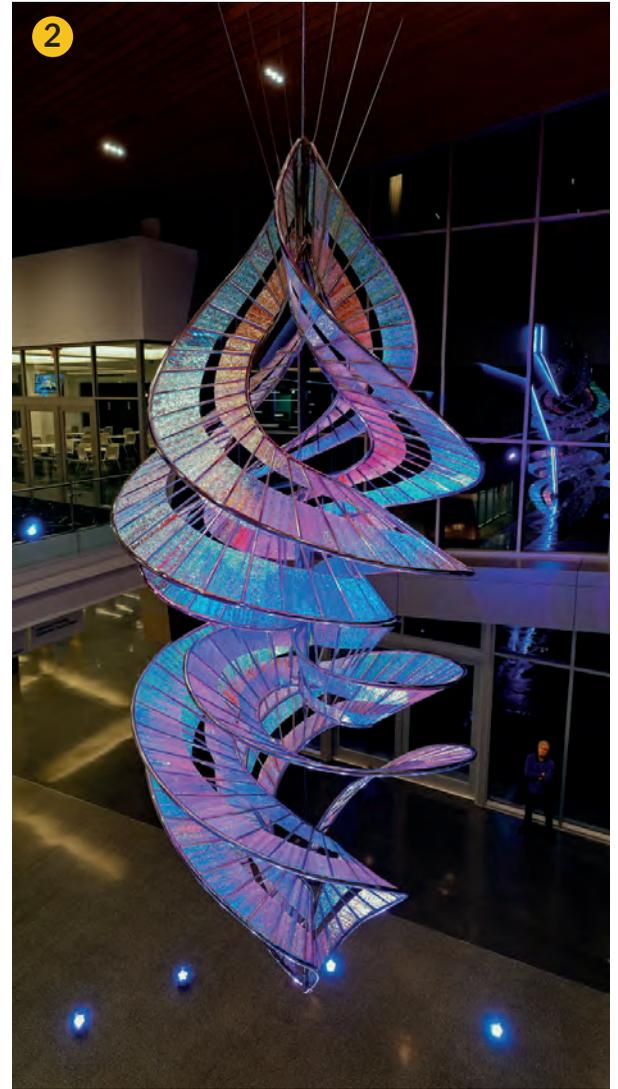


Image 1: Outdoor view of the newly renovated Charleston Coliseum and Convention Center; **Image 2:** The Lyle London Helix glass and steel sculpture is displayed in the Grand Lobby of the CCCC; **Image 3:** A view of downtown Charleston's historic Capitol Street.

architecture that purposely includes elements of West Virginia's topography. Its state-of-the-art technology, including computer climate control and optimum connectivity, not only satisfies meeting planners' technology demands but also demonstrates environmental consciousness. The expanded, cutting edge kitchen features a waste reduction system that reduces 100 pounds of food and solid waste to just 4 pounds. But perhaps the most aesthetically appealing aspect of the new CCCC for all generations is the impressive public art that transforms this meeting structure into a museum-like concourse.

So, will they come? Only if we tell them about it. Marketing is the life blood of tourism. We are no longer competing

on a regional basis; we now compete at a national level. I am fortunate to work with an outstanding sales team. During the past six years, the Charleston CVB has booked nearly 168,000 room nights for the city, resulting in \$110 million in economic impact. This year, bringing prospects to see our city and its new infrastructure firsthand, we are on pace to meet our goal of 32,000 rooms with several of those groups bringing more than 1,000 room nights each.

Competitive youth sports, such as the USA Boxing Junior Olympics and the U.S. Youth Soccer President's Cup and East Regionals, is the CVB's number one market. We also do an amazing job in the military and faith-based sectors, such as the Military Order of the Purple Heart

and the American Baptists, both coming to the city in 2021.

In addition to capitalizing on these expanded infrastructure capabilities, the Charleston CVB team has been actively embracing and promoting the "Hip, Historic... Almost Heaven" brand, informing leisure and business travelers alike of the following: ***With world-class food, arts, recreation and music, set against a scenic and historic backdrop, your visit to Charleston will be inspirational.*** It appears to be working. ♪