

MPI Greater Calgary Chapter: Western Hospitality Delivers Memorable Experience

From the White Hat Volunteers at the airport to service staff in hotels, restaurants, and meeting facilities, Calgary's western hospitality delivers a memorable experience for visitors. This makes Calgary a preferred destination for business, culture, and tourism, said panelists at the National Meetings Industry Day celebration in Calgary on April 15.

The Calgary Chapter of Meeting Professionals International (MPI) sponsored the panel discussion at the TELUS Convention Centre. Four members of the business community highlighted the strengths, challenges, and opportunities of Calgary's meetings and tourism industry.

"Tourism is the fastest-growing industry in the world," said **Randy Williams**, CEO of Tourism Calgary. If done well, it is sustainable and has a positive impact on a community's quality of life and economic well-being. People and companies often decide to move to Calgary after attending a convention or other meeting there. Calgary is a vibrant city on the edge of nature. The cowboy culture makes the city distinct, but behind that image is a full range of ethnic and cultural diversity.

Calgary is also an energy city, where important decisions about innovation and the future are made. Over 20% of the financial deals in Canada are made in Calgary. "Capital attracts capital," said **Kim Koss**, vice president of business development for the Calgary Chamber of Commerce. "We're at the right place at the right time."

To take advantage of tourism opportunities now and 30 years from now, Calgary must address several challenges. The most pressing is limited convention space. Among Calgary's venues, the TELUS Convention Centre is ranked first in number of meetings and third in revenue generated, with 122,000 square feet of convention space and 47,000 square feet of exhibit space. Stampede Park facilities have more than twice that. To become a top-tier meeting centre, attracting large convention groups, Calgary needs even more space; and to maximize financial benefit, that space must be in the heart of the city.

Meetings & Conventions Calgary is currently conducting feasibility studies on expansion of meeting facilities. This will require cost sharing among all three levels of government and private sector partners, and will time and a champion to see it through, Williams said. Panelists encouraged meeting professionals to send a clear and consistent message to local politicians about the need for well-planned expansion and the benefits it will bring to Calgary.

Infrastructure development will have to focus on airport development and better access to the city centre. Vancouver now has a rail link, as do other cities in North America and Europe. Visitors should be able to take the CTrain direct from the airport to downtown Calgary, Williams said.

High demand has made Calgary one of the more expensive cities in which to hold meetings, but the recent economic slump has made the city more competitive, as meetings have become a

buyer's market, said **Peter Gregus**, director of sales and marketing for Meetings & Conventions Calgary.

During the recession, companies limited discretionary travel to meetings. "This has created a pent-up demand to get together to talk," said **Karen Chown**, director of corporate and community engagement for Calgary Economic Development. Some of the work once done in meetings now takes place electronically, but people still need to get together, meet, and collaborate. Meetings can be greener, and professionals are up to the challenge, but people are not ready to pay the extra cost yet.

To keep Calgary a preferred destination, the greatest need is the vision to see what tourism can offer. "We are an event town," Koss said. "We run some of the best events, from the 1988 Olympics to Spruce Meadows and the Calgary Stampede each year. How could you not be excited to be part of that?"

Calgary has great community spirit and is known for its hospitality and friendliness. It starts with the more than 200 White Hat Volunteers who interact with over a million visitors each year. The Calgary Chapter of MPI recognized the work of the Calgary International Airport White Hat Volunteers with its Influence Award, presented to those who have influenced the success of the meetings industry without being a part of it.

Chapter president **Matt Squires** presented the award to **Debbie Stahl**, a manager at the Calgary Airport Authority, and White Hat representatives **Marie Harvey** and **Norm Harvey**. Squires noted that the White Hat Volunteers are "a true testament to Calgary" and make Calgary International Airport the friendliest airport in Canada. Thanks to the work of the White Hat Volunteers, the white Stetson has become synonymous with Calgary and is a much-prized item. Calgary gave away white hats at the Vancouver Olympics, generating great press coverage. It is an important part of Calgary's brand and symbolizes western hospitality to many people.

A Calgary Economic Development committee is researching whether the motto "Calgary—Heart of the New West" resonates with Calgarians, representing the full diversity of what the city has to offer, reported Chown. Whether the decision is to keep the motto or change it, great marketers will have the vision to make the most of Calgary's brand.