



Meeting expectations

Communities roll out the red carpet for business gatherings, ensuring economic benefits continue past their adjournment.

In-person meetings seem to be an endangered species in the internet age. Broadband connections and video streaming, for example, allow virtual meetings and webinars to be held anytime between parties anywhere in the world. But not everyone is online with the changes, says Rich Phaneuf, executive director and CEO of Raleigh-based Association Executives of North Carolina. “We recently did a survey asking our members their favorite way to receive educational information, and the results showed that face-to-face interaction is preferred.”

North Carolina is a popular destination for meetings and conventions: About 39 million domestic overnight trips were taken in North Carolina in 2016, according to Visit North Carolina, the tourism

promotion arm of Cary-based Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina Inc. That ranked it sixth in the U.S., while its 9.7 million day trips were the ninth most. Nearly 10% of trips were business-related.

While it's difficult to use dollars and cents to measure the exact economic impact of business meetings and conventions, Greenville-Pitt County Convention and Visitors Bureau Executive Director Andrew Schmidt says the effects are felt in several ways. Executive travel, for example, happens most often on weekdays, which supplements a slow time for hotels and restaurants.



PROVIDED BY WILMINGTON CONVENTION CENTER

The Wilmington Convention Center has 107,000 square feet of meeting space, and attendees can unwind on the adjacent riverfront, which is filled with restaurants and shops.



But free for the taking are unique experiences and positive observations, which can reinforce a region's brand and encourage guests to return, often for leisure. "The value of corporate meetings and events is not only 'X,' it's more like 'X to a factor of 5,'" Phaneuf says. "It's multiplied by the fact that the effects reverberate beyond what we can encapsulate in one figure. It's hard to measure, but the impact to that community is surely felt, even if the effects are nondirect."

Planners have many reasons to choose North Carolina for their events, and those start with spacious conference centers. Christian Schroeder, Winston-Salem Convention and Visitors Bureau's director of sales and services, says business events have an estimated annual economic impact of about \$240 million on Forsyth County. Some assemble around the work done at Wake Forest Innovation Quarter, almost 2 million square feet of offices, labs and classrooms where more than 70 businesses with 3,200 employees and five educational institutions with more than 7,500 students and trainees collaborate in fields from biomedical science to advanced materials. Many also are held at the 100,000-square-foot Benton Convention Center, which completed a nearly \$20 million renovation this summer. The center added improved technology and more flexible meeting space.

It's a similar situation in Wilmington's Convention District, which is anchored by Wilmington Convention Center. At 107,000 square feet, not including event space on the lawn, it is the coast's largest convention venue, says Connie Nelson, Wilmington and Beaches Convention and Visitors Bureau's communications and public-relations director. The adjacent Cape Fear riverfront grabs meeting planners' attention. Perusing its shops and dining in its restaurants are popular with attendees who are eager to sample local culture after the day's work is done. Soon they'll be able to stay at Embassy Suites Wilmington Riverfront Hotel, which should open this fall. And most make time to visit the three nearby beaches — Carolina, Kure and Wrightsville.



PROVIDED BY VISIT WINSTON-SALEM AND WINGS OVER WINSTON

Benton Convention Center and Wake Forest Innovation Quarter, along with attractions such as Sawtooth Center for Visual Arts, bring business events to downtown Winston-Salem.

Southern hospitality and more than 40 golf courses, including Pinehurst No. 2, the Donald Ross-designed course with an international reputation, make the Southern Pines, Aberdeen and Pinehurst region popular for meetings and conventions. It was the perfect backdrop for the International Association of Golf Tour Operators' 2016 North American Conference. It brought together 400 people representing golf tourism businesses in almost 30 countries.

But choices are only part of what keeps meetings and conventions returning to North Carolina. Counties, cities, towns, and convention and visitors bureaus must see the big picture, and Phaneuf says that comes into focus with cooperation. "When they don't bind together, it's like taking a stick to a gunfight. It's pointless. You compete so much that you end up struggling to get any business at all. It is more effective for everyone to bind together and compete aggressively, but fairly, with one another, for the benefit of the state."

Alicia McKee, sales manager for the Cabarrus County Convention and Visitors Bureau, says building relationships among venues, attractions and planners is essential. "To have the support of the partners really helps our jobs tremendously. If I have a challenge, all I have to do is pick up the phone, and I know we can figure it out together."

— Amanda Lea is a freelance writer from Charlotte.



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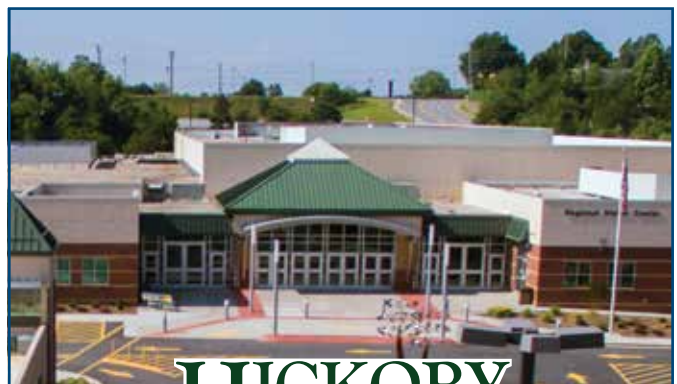
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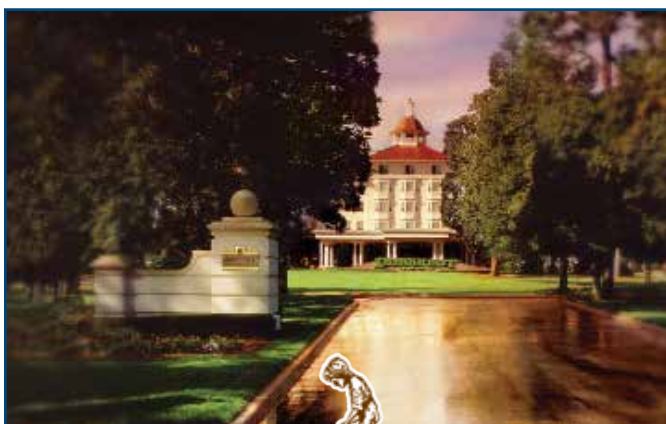
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For more information, contact Malinda Harrell, CMP, CASE sales@visitRaleigh.com

Greater Raleigh Convention and Visitors Bureau
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See Where the Water Takes You

Located riverfront and within the city's walkable River District, Wilmington's new Convention District will welcome the new Embassy Suites Wilmington Riverfront Hotel adjacent to the Wilmington Convention Center this fall. New restaurants, a marina and an event pier complement Wilmington's easy access to shops, attractions and nearby beaches to create a meeting location that feels like a vacation.

Wilmington and Beaches CVB
 505 Nutt Street, Unit A, Wilmington, NC 28401
 800.650.9064 | NCCoastalMeetingsBusiness.com



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Winston-Salem offers a welcomed southern wake-up call

Winston-Salem is a charming city that blends its rich Colonial roots and dedication to the arts. Centrally located in downtown Winston-Salem, the multi-million-dollar renovated Benton Convention Center features 100,000 square feet of flexible meeting space with architectural nods to Winston-Salem's historic arts, tobacco and textile past.

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