Preparing for the DNC

Hoteliers throughout the greater Denver area are working hard to prepare for the Democratic National Convention (DNC), scheduled to begin August 25, just seven weeks from now. There are thousands of details to consider and many unknowns to anticipate when some 50,000 media personnel and delegates converge, along with an expected contingent of vocal protesters.

For sure, the 2008 DNC will be strikingly different from the one held in Denver exactly 100 years ago. In those simpler times, Denver was awarded the 1908 convention by pledging $100,000, outbidding Atlantic City, Chicago, Louisville, and St. Louis, according to the Denver Post. Wagons full of snow were brought in from the mountains to cool the delegates in those pre-air conditioning days. Five women were credentialed as delegates, a first for a major party convention in the days before the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granted women the right to vote in 1920.

Security was not a big issue. The city merely hired a few Pinkerton guards and 16 extra police officers. Their biggest challenge was to break up a snowball fight between delegates.

With the nomination of William Jennings Bryan, (who would go on to lose the general election to Republican William Howard Taft), a foregone conclusion, Denver hired 40 Apache Indians to entertain the conventioneers. Writer Damon Runyon, noted for his distinctive vernacular style, remarked that the war whoops and dances made it difficult to distinguish the Indians from the conventioneers, except that the latter were “wearing a lot of badges” and “yelling all the time!”

For 2008, estimated costs for the convention have risen to at least $100 million—$50 million from the federal government, $40 million from private donations, and $10 million from the city. Security is a major issue. Any number of groups loosely organized under the umbrella of the “Recreate 68 Alliance” hope to deliver their political messages through public demonstrations that may develop into chaos and turmoil similar to that experienced at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. The city has placed all sorts of restrictions on protest activities, which has led the American Civil Liberties Union to file suits asking for relief in the name of freedom of speech.

Some 90 hotels in the greater Denver area have committed room blocks to house conventioneers and media personnel. Many of the hotels are in the suburbs or near Denver International Airport. Getting people to and from the convention arena, the 675,000 square foot Pepsi Center, will be a challenge, even if the streets are not blocked by protesters.

Hotel managers are developing plans to make sure personnel and supplies get to their properties throughout the week. They also face occupancy challenges, as normal business is expected to drop off several days prior to the convention and not pick up again until several days after the delegates go home.

The Denver Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau is offering hotels and other businesses special courses on Denver attractions and hospitality.

The convention has pledged to consider the environmental impact of the meetings and to have a list of programs and initiatives designed to limit the carbon footprint of the activities to the extent possible. To help handle the tons of extra newsprint expected to be produced by the convention, area hotels are being asked to provide recycling bins at convenient locations. In addition, Colorado-based Molson Coors Brewing Company, which produces ethanol from waste beer, will supply all of the E85 ethanol needed to power the fleet of GM flex-fuel vehicles that will be used by the DNC.

The Hilton Garden Inn Denver Airport, which is managed by Outrigger Lodging Services, has blocked 110 of its 167 rooms for the DNC. Hopefully, they will be miles from the protests and congestion that are forecast for the downtown area and will be able to concentrate on making all their guests feel welcome, as they do 365 days a year. Good luck to all.