APEC - Hawaii Lands a Meetings & Conventions “Olympics”

Those of us connected with Hawaii’s multifaceted Travel & Tourism industry were thrilled and excited two Sundays ago when President Barack Obama announced in Singapore that the 2011 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit will be held in Honolulu. This meeting of world leaders will benefit the entire state in many ways and, depending on how it is handled, has the potential to restart our Visitor Industry and economy, which have endured significant economic hardship for several years.

It is hard to overstate the importance of the APEC gathering for Hawaii. Our state’s foremost meetings and conventions expert, Pris Texeira, told me, “In the world of meetings and conventions, APEC is HUGE! It’s the equivalent of the Olympics for Hawaii in the meetings industry.” The attendance at this year’s APEC summit in Singapore totaled over 10,000.

APEC brings together the leaders of 21 Asia-Pacific region economies each year to discuss the status and future potential for trade and investments all around the Pacific Rim. Generally, the heads of state or government from all the countries linked by the Pacific in South and North America, Asia, and Oceania attend, as well as cabinet ministers and other top officials.

APEC’s members are Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Philippines, Russia, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, the United States, and Vietnam.

According to Imelda Saad, reporting for channelnewsasia.com, the 2009 summit in Singapore was handled exceptionally well. The city-state “rolled out the red carpet,” and everything ran with “clockwork precision.” The host committee recruited some 2,000 volunteers to help a cadre of paid workers spruce up the local infrastructure and public areas. They also very successfully focused on the overall experience and hospitality. Paraphrasing a quote in the Saad article: Ambassador Michael Tay, Executive Director of the APEC secretariat, said, “It was amazing to walk into any establishment and have a Singaporean come up and say, ‘How can I help you? Would you like to go to this place? Would you like to go to that place?’ They will walk with you, talk with you, and it happens everywhere in Singapore.”

The minute I heard the announcement of APEC Hawaii 2011, I called Pris Texeira on her mobile telephone to pledge Outrigger’s support.

Pris was quick to give credit to East-West Center President, Dr. Charles E. Morrison, for stepping up to the plate to lead the team that prepared Hawaii’s bid to host APEC. Although he is neither a tourism industry professional nor a meeting planner, he recognized the enormous opportunity. Overcoming naysayers and skeptics, he led the charge for this major undertaking.

Pris also praised the work of Hawaii Tourism Authority President Mike McCartney. With years of political experience, Mike knew that even if Hawaii submitted the best bid, it might go nowhere without the involvement and support of both our congressional delegation and the business community. Mike partnered with Dr. Morrison to secure the support of our congressional delegation, the military (U.S. Pacific Command – PACOM), and a host of Hawaii business leaders, including Outrigger CEO David Carey.

Now, some may feel like the proverbial barking dog that has sunk its teeth into the tire of a car it was chasing. We captured APEC. What will we do with it? Is Hawaii up to the challenge?

I think we can do the job with memorable flair and efficiency, but it will take a lot of very hard work and expert organization. Security will be a major concern, greater perhaps than for any other event ever held here. Many will recall the riots that broke out in Seattle during the World Trade Organization’s Ministerial Conference in November 1999. There were even some peaceful protests staged in Hawaii during the Annual Meeting of the Asian Development Bank held at the Hawaii Convention Center in May 2001.

Hawaii’s leaders from business, labor, and the state and city governments should all vow to put aside their differences and come together to make APEC Hawaii 2011 the best major international meeting that has ever happened in our state, if not the Pacific area or the country.

It is going to take a lot of commitment from everyone – a positive attitude, a passion, and a belief that we can join forces to upgrade our tourism infrastructure and training during this era of economic challenges.
I saw this happen in Denver last year when everyone in the city worked around the clock to host the Democratic National Convention (DNC), where Barack Obama was nominated as candidate for president. As in Singapore last month, everything ran with “clockwork precision” in the Mile High City.

The DNC was actually a much larger event than APEC. Tens of thousands of delegates, media representatives, and politicians needed to be housed and moved around the metropolitan area. The possibility of massive protests, riots, or terrorist activities was enormous. But thanks to good planning and nearly flawless execution, there were only a few minor hitches, and from my point of view, and that of almost everyone, including the many Hawaii delegates I spoke to, everything went extremely well. The reputation of Denver as a place that can handle a major meeting is, like the city itself, a mile high.

I believe APEC Hawaii 2011 is the stroke of luck Hawaii’s economy so desperately needs. This is our chance to conclusively prove that our island state is not only a great place to relax and enjoy beautiful weather, sparkling oceans, and many unique multicultural experiences, it is our opportunity to prove conclusively that Hawaii is also a place where those unique features are not distractions but catalysts that actually promote and enhance serious business get-togethers, high-level meetings, and groundbreaking, world-changing idea exchange.

On the other hand, we should keep in mind that having the spotlight shining on us gives the world an unparalleled opportunity not only to see the beauty of Hawaii as both a destination and a legitimate place to do serious business, it illuminates blemishes too—the deplorable state of public restrooms at many beach parks and poorly maintained roads come quickly to mind—so we should work hard to clear up such blemishes well before the delegates arrive. In fact, we should do this as soon as possible, since these blemishes are visible, every day of every year, to our state’s nearly 7 million annual visitors, the source of powerful “word-of-mouth” reputation.

*Imua, Hawaii – Let’s make APEC Hawaii 2011 No Ka Oi!!*