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‘Green’ helping area woo conventions

By Jonathan D. Epstein

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Buffalo Niagara’s tourism and convention industry is trying to go “green” in an effort to establish a niche and land more large conference business.

The Buffalo Niagara Convention & Visitors Bureau is planning to start working with hospitality partners such as hotels, restaurants and local attractions to review current environmental practices and develop a plan to do more.

In particular, the bureau wants the industry to improve in managing waste, saving energy and water, producing and disposing of food, and using environmentally safe cleaning products, paint, and office practices.

The goal is to make Western New York more appealing to event planners and groups that care about environmental issues and are increasingly making their decisions about locations based on such criteria.

Some groups, for example, insist on being able to use mass transit rather than hiring additional transportation that will add to the fuel emissions and pollution in the air.

“Being green is something that is really a hot topic in the meeting industry now,” said Michael R. Even, the bureau’s director of convention sales and services. “So that niche we’re exploring more and more, finding out how we can best present ourselves as a green conference location.”

So far, the effort is in the early stages, with regular communications through trade groups and individual businesses and entities, but no formal plan as yet. There’s also no estimate yet of the cost involved. But Even said the bureau definitely intends to proceed.

“It’ll be a big project, but it’s definitely something that has to be discussed,” he said. “It’s become a niche market for us that we should be good at.” Already, the initiatives are paying off. The bureau will announce as early as today that it has landed two major environmental conferences in 2009 and 2010, respectively, due to both existing “green” initiatives and its pledge to do better.

The American Solar Energy Society chose Buffalo for its National Solar Energy Conference, a “premier” meeting on renewable energy and energy efficiency. The May 2009 conference is expected to attract more than 1,500 energy experts, entrepreneurs and other parties from around the world, leading to more than 2,000 “hotel room nights” and generating \$1.2 million for Buffalo’s economy.

Even said a major factor in winning that group was that Buffalo in the past hosted Solar Splash, a solar energy competition for students to build and race solar-powered boats on Hoyt Lake in Delaware Park. That event “put us on the map,” he said.

The existence of the windmills near Buffalo’s waterfront and Buffalo’s sunny summer weather also caught the group’s attention, as did the help of former Erie County lawmaker Joan Bozer, who is active in the sustainable energy field.

“The convention business is highly competitive,” Even said. “More and more we’re having to be creative about the groups that we go after and looking at the resources that we have in the community.”

“It’s helping our image as a progressive, forward-thinking community,” Bozer said. “It’s a real plus for Buffalo and our community.”

Similarly, the North American Association for Environmental Education selected Buffalo for its national conference in 2010 after the bureau submitted a proposal highlighting how the tourism industry locally would become more “green.” NAAEE is the trade group for environmental education, with members working in nonformal organizations, primary and secondary schools, universities, government agencies and corporations in North America and 55 countries.

That meeting is expected to bring more than 1,200 attendees for 3,600 room nights, yielding more than \$1 million.

“Being green is becoming part of the criteria organizations consider when selecting a host city for their conference,” Bureau President and CEO Richard Geiger said in a press release. “The signing of these two conferences signifies that our community is sensitive to environmental and energy issues.”

Even admitted that “we do have a little ways to go as it relates to being green,” and also conceded that “we do lag behind some of the major destinations” in public transportation. Still, he said the key is education. He also noted that the combination of Metro Rail and the city’s bus system, together with the concentrated nature of many destinations “down the spine” of the city, makes it easier to get around Buffalo anyway. And the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority has become more aggressive itself about marketing its services to groups.

“We might not be as sophisticated as New York City or Boston, but for a city of our size, we’ve done a great job, and we can sell that to meeting planners, and we see that more and more,” Even said.

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