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PALM BEACH COUNTY CONVENTION CENTER SEES RECORD BOOKINGS IN 2016

WEST PALM BEACH – Convention and meeting bookings at the Palm Beach County Convention Center surged to record-breaking levels in 2016, boosted largely by the opening of the neighboring Hilton West Palm Beach and an enhanced sales push.

This year's bookings are on pace to shatter that record, and 2018 is already shaping up to be another banner year for the center, which opened in 2003 but struggled without a connected hotel to house conference attendees.

"This is basically the future, and what we have always envisioned," Dave Anderson, the convention center's general manager said of the booking surge. "Our package is so great. The airport is ranked worldwide. The Intracoastal is right up the street. The ocean is a mile away. CityPlace is across the street. The connected hotel. You have all of these cool little restaurants opening up downtown. Then you have Brightline starting soon ...We have all the pieces the planners are looking for. That connected hotel was the last piece."

Over the next two months the center will host six large events, including the governor's annual hurricane conference.

In all, the convention center will host events on 45 days during the 2-month stretch, bringing thousands of domestic and international tourists to the county.

To keep that momentum going, Anderson said it's critical that out-of-town visitors feel welcomed as soon as they arrive in Palm Beach County.

"We need to welcome these people from the moment they hit the airport," Anderson said. "We need these people to have an amazing time. Not just the clients who chose to come here, but all the attendees."

Many meeting planners work with multiple clients, and whether they continue to bring business to the county depends on "the experience they have while they are here," Anderson said.

The building's sales team, which includes convention center staffers and officials with Discover the Palm Beaches, the county's official tourism marketing organization, have teamed up with government and business leaders in an effort to set the destination apart from other vacation spots.

The team is putting banners along Okeechobee Boulevard to announce the arrival of convention groups and to make attendees feel welcome. Tourism leaders are also working with restaurants in downtown West Palm Beach to provide "Dine Around" packages for large groups.

Hotel bookings as a result of convention center business grew by 94 percent last year, according to Discover.

Before the Hilton opened in Jan. 2016, the convention center was limited to competing for events that would generate a maximum of about 450 nightly hotel bookings, officials have said.

But when Hilton's 400 rooms are combined with those at other nearby hotels, including the West Palm Beach Marriott, the Hyatt Place and the Residence Inn in downtown West Palm Beach, the convention center's sales team can vie for much larger events.

"The recent opening of the Hilton West Palm Beach, physically connected to the Palm Beach County Convention Center, has elevated West Palm Beach's convention district as a fresh new option for meetings and conventions," said Kelly Cavers, Discover's Senior Vice President of Group Sales.