

Hopes high in hospitality

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Georgia's hotels and restaurants had a good year in 2013, and hospitality leaders hope the openings of new attractions in metro Atlanta will bring even better tidings in 2014.

Three major downtown attractions will open this year — the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, the College Football Hall of Fame and the Atlanta Streetcar — “the realization of projects we've talked about for years,” according to William Pate, the city's top hospitality ambassador.

Also coming in July is the opening of the first major wave of shops at Buckhead Atlanta (the new name and concept for the stalled Streets of Buckhead mixed-use development) and the opening of Ponce City Market in the former City Hall East — major draws for shoppers and foodies alike, said Pate, the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau president and CEO.

Atlanta, long a player for big conventions, is adding to its inventory of family-friendly attractions to entice tourists, he said.

The New York Times recently named downtown Atlanta as one of its top 52 places in the world to visit in 2014.

“The city has got tremendous momentum behind it because of (this new) construction,” Pate said.

Hospitality leaders hope the international buzz surrounding the new attractions outweighs the dent in metro Atlanta's image caused by last week's storm, which made the region a national punch line for its poor response. Conventions book years in advance. The storm could become an issue that rival cities use to pitch against Atlanta.

The new attractions have helped the ACVB line up 21 "citywide" conventions for 2014. Citywide conventions are trade shows that fill up more than 5,000 hotel rooms at their peak.

It's the most the city has had in recent memory, Pate said, and comes after the city played host to 17 in 2013.

The hospitality industry had an economic impact statewide of more than \$51 billion in 2012, the latest full year for which data are available. It is one of the state's biggest industries, employing more than 400,000 people and helping to fill local tax coffers through retail sales and taxes on hotel stays and rental cars.

However, the financial crisis muted hospitality's impact, as companies curtailed spending on business travel and conventions, and "staycations" replaced family trips.

Pate said leisure travel is improving and "companies are putting their sales forces back on the road."

Metro Atlanta hotel occupancy rose to 63.2 percent in 2013, up from 60.9 percent in 2012, according to data from the ACVB compiled by Smith Travel Research.

Hospitality employment hit just over 399,000 jobs statewide in 2008, according to the state Department of Economic Development. The next year, the state reported nearly 17,000 fewer hospitality jobs. But employment in the sector topped 405,000 last year, according to state figures.

Last summer, the city played host to the American Society of Association Executives, the trade organization representing the nation's major trade groups. It was the group's first convention in Atlanta in two decades, and brought with it exposure for the metro area to some of the highest profile executives in the nation.

Pate said many of those executives, who decide where to book conventions, had not been to Atlanta since the 1996 Summer Olympics and hadn't seen attractions around Centennial Olympic Park or in other areas of the region.

The College Football Hall of Fame will open this fall and have its second hall of fame class induction in Atlanta this year; the first was last year at the Omni Hotel. The hall will become a magnet, Pate said, for football fans attending the Chick-fil-A College Football Kickoff games, the SEC Championship and the annual Chick-fil-A Bowl on New Year's Eve.

Pate said the civil rights center's exhibits, conferences and its archives of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s writings will draw international attention. Opening in May, the center will be a short ride on the first phase of the city's new streetcar system, which will tie the tourist hub around Centennial Olympic Park with the skyscrapers of downtown and the King Center and Sweet Auburn neighborhood.

The center will pull not only tourists and scholars who want to see the King papers, but also will become a hub for dialogue about current issues surrounding human and civil rights, Executive Director Doug Shipman said.

"We're trying to use the center as a way to put Atlanta on the (world's) stage," Shipman said.