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Indy convention industry bouncing back from pandemic shutdown



by: Russ McQuaid



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LAST WEEK ALONE VISIT INDY BOOKED \$50 MILLION WORTH OF FUTURE CONVENTION BUSINESS. That business is on our books starting in 2021 until 2031, and so there is a hunger among event organizers, major sporting events, corporations, major associations coast-to-coast picking up the phone and prospecting cities and they're picking Indy because of that track record."

That track record shows Indianapolis hosted 50 live events and 230,000 visitors in the last year as the convention industry slowly recovered while the tourism trade overall slumped across the country due to pandemic restrictions.

"We're getting new bookings that have never considered Indianapolis for a couple different reasons," said Gahl. "One, the proof of concept that we can bring people safely into the city and meet in a meaningful way. Two is the fact that March Madness did cast a light on Indianapolis in a positive way. We know that there was more than \$25 million worth of media exposure about Indianapolis as a host city inevitably has turned convention planners' attention to Indianapolis."

Gahl said one of those convention planners made the recent decision to pick Indianapolis over Orlando for a 2022 conference partially based on the coverage the city received during the just passed NCAA Mens Basketball Tournament.

During the last good year for the convention and visitor business in Indianapolis, 2019 tourism spending had a \$5.6 billion economic impact locally and employed 83,000 people.

A volleyball tournament attracted 15,000 participants and observers to all eleven exhibition halls of the Indiana Convention Center this past weekend and in the coming weeks, Visit Indy will launch its "Find Your Pace" ad campaign in markets throughout the Midwest region to encourage weekend visitors looking to get out 

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safety upgrades. Visit Indy could take those facts, that we're closed, that we're keeping it sealed off and safe, as we look back, that \$7 million investment in new health and safety upgrades inside that building was a key calling card, a key message that we used to invite these conventions to come back inside to test the grounds of Indianapolis for their meetings and convention, each one of them a proof of concept ultimately giving confidence to our friends here in Indianapolis and at the NCAA."

Despite the pandemic, construction continued on several new downtown hotels and expansion plans for the convention center and headquarters hotel on the Pan Am Plaza site moved forward.

"We're seeing more and more lights flicker on in businesses, attractions, hotels, they might have turned their lights on in time for March Madness but had a question mark whether they could sustain," said Gahl. "We know that many of our restaurants, because they're back online, are seeking workers to come and help with shifts because there's that demand, and as we emerge from the pandemic, there's not only convention tourism, there's leisure tourism."

The lights are slowly coming back on at the former Ram Restaurant now taken over by Goodwood Brewing and Spirits at 140 South Illinois Street.

"Indianapolis has always been a progressive city, very business-friendly city," said Goodwood Chairman & CEO Ted Mitzlaff. "Not only do we have convention business, you've got Lucas Oil Stadium, you've got basketball, all within a stone's throw from here. It's a great town, it's a great mix of local support with a tremendous amount of tourism."

Mitzlaff said he expects to hire 80 people to staff the restaurant's opening day on

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Mitzlaff operates three Goodwood restaurants in Kentucky.

I asked him who he would cheer for should UK play IU at Bankers Life Fieldhouse next season.

“I’ll pull for whoever’s drinking the most beer,” he said. “I’m a Louisville fan, so it’s all good to me.”

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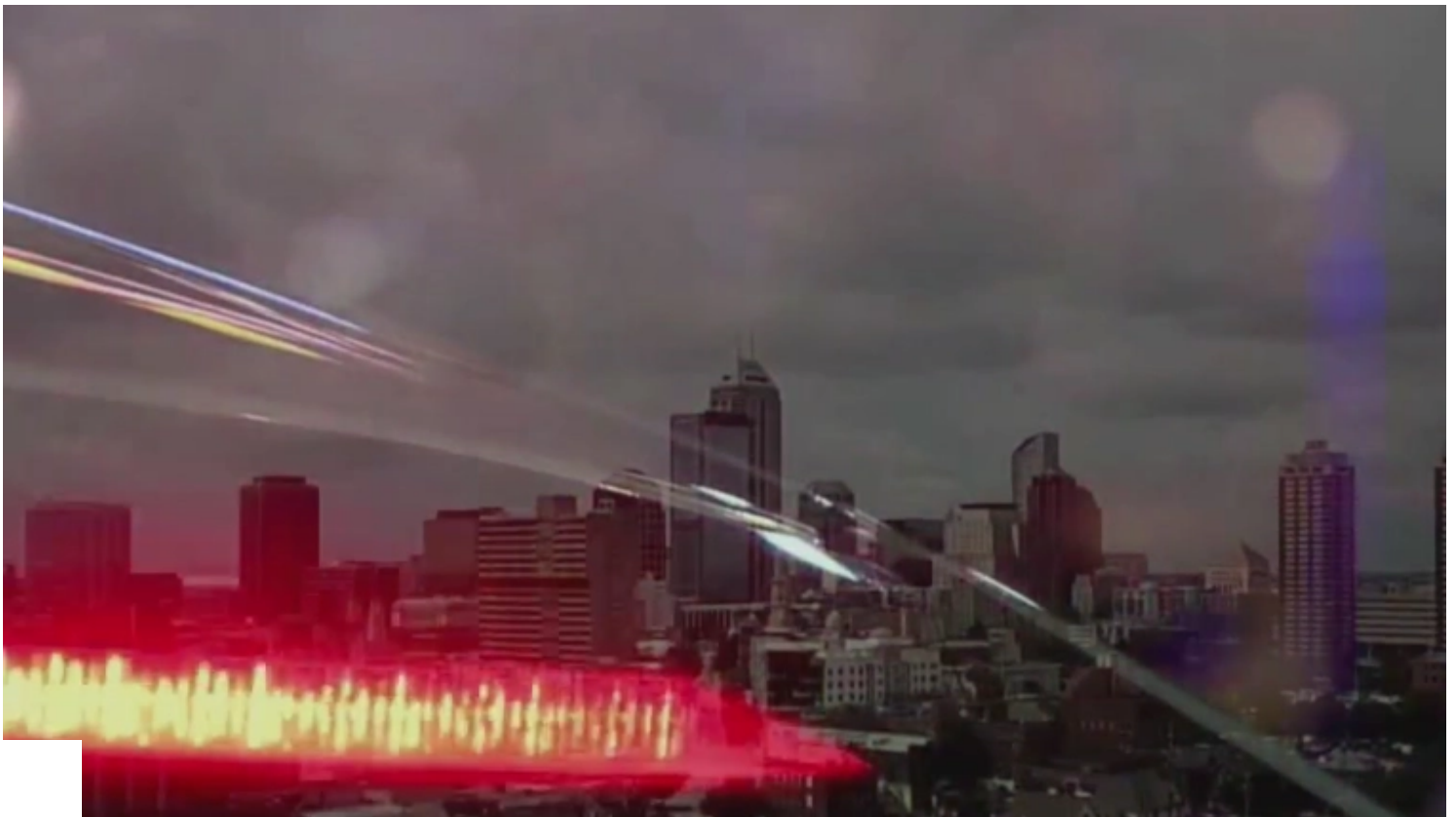
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