

Beach convention center lands meeting of bus-tourism group

The Virginian-Pilot
© October 15, 2004
Last updated: 7:36 PM

VIRGINIA BEACH — The city's new \$202 million convention center scored its first big coup Thursday when the American Bus Association announced it will hold its 2008 annual meeting in the new hall.

It's the kind of large national convention that city officials hoped the new convention center would attract. It would not have fit into the existing Pavilion.

"In the game of booking conventions, Virginia Beach has scored a home run," said Jim Ricketts, director of the city's Convention and Visitors Bureau.

It is the first major national convention booking that will use the entire capacity of the new convention center, which is scheduled for completion in early 2007. The first phase will open in June.

The bus convention will bring about 3,000 travel and group tour industry representatives from the United States and Canada. The show allows bus and tour operators to meet with thousands of travel destinations in a series of seven-minute appointments that result in more than 65,000 scheduled appointments.

The conventioners will use about 8,000 room-nights at local hotels and will spend about \$4 million. City officials also hope the convention will land Virginia Beach some of that bus tour business, resulting in more tourist visits.

Last year, the city gambled that knocking down its existing Oceanfront convention center, the Pavilion, and replacing it with something much bigger — and much more expensive — would reap tourist dividends. The bus convention is the first sign that that strategy is working.

Virginia Beach attracts about 3 million visitors a year. City officials hope the new convention center and the new Hilton Hotel at 31st Street — scheduled to open New Year's Eve — will attract a wealthier class of tourists and conventioners. The city won the bus convention over five other major cities.

Peter J. Pantuso, president of the bus association, said the group chose Virginia Beach, in part, because of the new convention hall. "Virginia Beach is fast becoming must-see for bus and tour operators," he said.

Thursday's announcement came during a "topping-off" ceremony for the convention center's 150-foot observation tower. The roof will be completed later this month.