

Convention

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come,’ convention center hotel strategy has repeatedly proven to fail. In markets from Phoenix to Baltimore, similar convention hotel projects have underperformed and taxpayers have been stuck with the bill while developers and landowners receive enormous windfalls.”

But supporters say the hotel will bring business to the entire city, including to other hotels. And they say cities like Denver and Fort Worth Texas are examples of cities that dramatically increased their conventions business after building headquarters hotels.

Potillo is one of a group of 30 convention planners and travel experts convened to advise Travel Portland on how to attract more visitors to the city. He organizes an annual convention that brings together 3,000 -3,500 educators from schools, colleges and universities all across the United States, Canada, and beyond.

“We have been looking at Portland,” he said. “But the one thing that keeps us from coming to this city is that it doesn’t have a headquarters hotel.”

It matters, Potillo said, because what people want from a convention are networking opportunities in an intimate and easily accessible environment. His events include 125 breakfasts, lunches, dinners and mixers where educators can network. But they



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can’t do that unless they have a central gathering place.

Dean Phelus agrees. Phelus organizes the American Alliance of Museums annual meeting, which brings together between 5,000 and 6,000 people from 50 different countries and every state in the union. The last time he chose Portland was in 2004, he says, when he used eight different hotels.

“We’re really waiting for this headquarters hotel to be built before we come back to Portland,” he said. “We want the headquarters Hotel. We need the headquarters hotel. What I’m looking for is: ‘Am I able to promote a greater sense of community and intimacy among my group?’ So we can’t be too spread out.”

Potillo and Phelus say Portland is a dream destination in many ways and they can easily rattle off the reasons why: Having a range of prices for food and entertainment all in the same neighborhood; No sales tax; Near Canada; Great book stores; Close to water.

“Portland is a fabulous city,” Potillo said. “It’s got natural beauty. It’s rich in culture. It has live theater, performing arts and museums. It’s pedestrian friendly and easy to navigate. And it’s got a great food scene –one of the best in the USA –and I’ve been to just about every city in the country.”

Brian McCartin, VP for convention and tourism sales with Travel Portland, said the advisory group has also given useful criti-

cism. “We realized we should be asking the customers what they think of Portland as a destination. It’s really an opportunity to advise us and we asked them to be brutally candid,” he said.

The group told Travel Portland that it needed to improve its website. And it criticized Portland for having too few taxis. So last year, Travel Portland changed its website and supported the expansion of Portland’s taxi permits to Union Cabs.

“To see those changes, that put a smile on our faces,” said Potillo, “It may seem small but it’s significant to us. We hope you get this headquarters hotel because we’d like to come here.”

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