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CVB eyes record for conventions

100,000 hotel room nights within reach in '09

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COURTESY FEDEX FORUM

Church of God in Christ convention is scheduled to stay in Memphis until at least 2012.

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Traveling for business and leisure may be headed for the pits, but the Memphis convention business is moving at full speed.

With the perennial **Church of God in Christ** convention scheduled to stay in the city until at least 2012, the National Baptist Convention's annual conference returning in September and the just-announced Urban Network Music and Entertainment Summit scheduled for June, 2009 is projected to be another record-breaking year for the **Memphis Convention & Visitors' Bureau**.

The success in conventions is being taken with a grain of salt, says John Oros, executive vice president of the CVB.

Oros says booking pace for conventions is already 25% ahead of where it was at this time in 2008, but the economy has had a serious impact on other portions of the tourism and hospitality business.

"Business and leisure travel have been affected to the point where both segments have been greatly reduced," Oros says. "Those two areas constitute 60% of the occupied hotel rooms in Memphis. Meetings and conventions are about 15%."

Leisure travel could spike some in Memphis this year when **FedExForum** hosts the Conference USA Tournament presented by Aeropostale and the Sweet 16 round of the 2009 NCAA men's basketball tournament. On average, the Conference USA Tournament attracts 12,500 people; the NCAAs could bring another 18,500 to the city.

Such major events put the city in a positive spotlight and serve to boost business, Oros says.

Emily Boling Lynn, director of convention center sales at the CVB, says the possibility of booking 100,000 room nights is strong this year, and that has never happened before in the

city. She says the second half of the year is looking positive and the Cook Convention Center has events booked out to 2017.

Attracting the Urban Network Summit is a big win, Oros says, because similar events typically book three or four years in advance. The organization recently finalized its decision for the summit, which is taking place in June.

Miller London, CEO of Urban Network, says Memphis is one of two new locations for the Los Angeles-based summit. The other regional location is Houston. London says this year's event is expected to attract up to 1,700 people to Memphis, but once it gets off the ground, it could attract up to 5,000 in future years.

"We want it to be a long-term deal and we want to call Memphis home for a long time," London says. "I've been coming to the city since 1969, and with attractions like Stax (Museum of American Soul Music) and Beale Street, Memphis has a deep musical history we want to be a part of."

Another long-standing event, the Helen Britt Gift and Jewelry Show, just brought more than 5,000 retail owners to the city for the 35th year in a row. The show comes to town three times a year, says Dave Harrington, show manager for Helen Britt. Harrington says the Memphis shows are regional draws for Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, Missouri and Mississippi.

As the convention center continues to attract events to the city, the question of another expansion or new convention center continues to surface. But after a committee was appointed and disbanded last year, the possibility for expansion is less than concrete.

"I don't think the public will is there," Oros says. "But we have to make sure our hotels and convention center are what meeting planners are looking for."

Memphis Convention & Visitors' Bureau

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