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Local ties translate into bookings for the new convention center

BY RICK RUGGLES
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Local connections have played key roles in convincing some regional and national groups to schedule meetings in Omaha's new convention center.

An administrator with the Virginia-based National Science Teachers Association grew up in the Fairbury, Neb., area, graduated from Peru State College and started his teaching career in Scribner, Neb.



A construction worker walks through what will be the lobby to the grand ballroom in the new convention center.

A department head at the Peter Kiewit Institute of Information Science, Technology and Engineering believed that a convention in Omaha would bring national exposure to the institute's academic programs.

Nebraska Department of Roads officials have never hosted the Western Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials' annual convention. Omaha's new convention center, which opens late this summer, gave them a new venue for the event.

Promoters of the convention center see their facility as more than a place for Nebraska and Iowa associations to congregate. But they acknowledge that local contacts will be vital to enticing national conventions to Omaha.

By bringing their conventions to town, local groups gain recognition, and the convention center and hotels get much-needed business.

So important are local contacts that the Greater Omaha Convention and Visitors Bureau will formalize a "bring it home" campaign within the next few weeks.

Susan Koba, past president of the Nebraska Association of Teachers of Science, knew three years ago that she needed to reach Wendell Mohling in Arlington, Va., to attract a regional conference of the national association.



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"My role was to get him here in the first place, I guess," Koba said.

"Of course," Mohling said, "my arm was easily twisted since I was formerly from Nebraska."

Mohling, associate executive director of the national association, had grown up in Nebraska.

Ultimately, he said, after visiting Omaha in 2000 and 2001, he was convinced that the new convention center would be a good place for the association's 2006 conference.

Nine associations and businesses have agreed to hold a convention at the new facility through 2006.

The convention and visitors bureau campaign will encourage Omahans to tell the associations they belong to about the new convention center and the city's other attractions.

Deepak Khazanchi has done his part. A department chairman at the Kiewit Institute's College of Information Science and Technology, Khazanchi said he wants to bring international attention to the college's programs.

He and two other representatives of the college made a pitch more than a year ago for the International Conference on Information Systems in 2005. Las Vegas beat out Omaha.

Las Vegas had more "brand recognition," said Blake Ives, a University of Houston professor who was on the committee that made the decision.

When you think of Las Vegas, Ives said, "images come to mind. Omaha - less images come to mind."

Nevertheless, Ives said, he and his colleagues were impressed with the Omaha contingent's presentation. They selected Omaha for the 2005 Americas Conference on Information Systems.

The convention, which attracts professors, recent graduates of doctoral programs and representatives of technology companies, is somewhat smaller and draws attendees from North America rather than worldwide.

John Craig, director of the Nebraska Department of Roads, successfully pushed to bring the western highway association's 2005 conference to Nebraska for the first time.

John Jacobsen, deputy director of the Nebraska Department of Roads, said the association decided to meet in Nebraska, and state roads officials chose the new convention center.

"It's a big deal," Jacobsen said of the convention.

As the convention and visitors bureau gears up for its bring-it-home campaign, some others clearly have already launched their own.

Koba of the science teachers' association said that as Omaha provides more and better attractions, "we kind of owe it to the city" to let others know.

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