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First-time Omaha visitors drawn by conventions

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First-time visitors to Omaha ruled the jungle Friday night when members of the Americas Conference on Information Systems gathered at the Henry Doorly Zoo.

Of about 800 conventioners gathered for dinner, drinks and dancing near the Desert Dome, only a handful raised their hands when UNO Chancellor Nancy Belck, the guest speaker, asked how many had visited the city before.

"It was pretty funny," said Deepak Khazanchi, who helped lure the conference to town. "But everyone is having a good time. They are all impressed with the city and our facilities."

Khazanchi and Ilze Zigurs, two professors at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, helped organize the gathering of academics and researchers from around the world.

More than 1,000 people from 400 countries are attending the AMCIS convention, one of three being held here in a 10-day period.

There are about 1,300 people attending the American Coalition of Ethanol convention and 250 more visiting with the Paralyzed Veterans of America.

Khazanchi said in the past the AMCIS has held its conference in cities such New York, Dallas, Boston and Tampa, Fla. Next year the group will meet in Acapulco, Mexico.

Khazanchi, chairman of UNO's department of systems and quantitative analysis, said he moved to Omaha in 2000 after teaching at the University of Northern Kentucky. He and Zigurs began working in 2001 to get their technology group to come to Omaha.

The combination of the Qwest Center Omaha and the Hilton Omaha have helped the city make a great impression on the conference participants, Khazanchi said.

"All the delegates that I've talked to today have given absolutely rave reviews for both facilities," he said. "A lot of them have already visited the Old Market and are enjoying walking along the river.

"There's a jazz concert (tonight) at the Lewis & Clark Landing, and I bet you a large percentage of them will go to that."

Dana Markel, executive director of the Greater Omaha Convention and Visitors Bureau, said residents like Khazanchi and Zigurs are "perfect ambassadors" for the city.

"Two of the conferences being held in Omaha can be directly attributed to the help we receive from our local Hometown Heroes," she said. "Both AMCIS and Paralyzed Veterans of America conferences came to Omaha because local people made the time and effort to promote Omaha as a great place to visit and hold meetings."

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