

Hispanic Chamber convention coming to Milwaukee

Jose Olivieri

The Business Journal of Milwaukee

A/11/1

From the February 25, 2005 print edition

The U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (USHCC) convention will be held in Milwaukee Sept. 14-17. Yes, that's right -- the national Hispanic Chamber of Commerce convention is being held in Milwaukee.

This event should bring approximately 10,000 visitors to Milwaukee -- people who have as a primary focus the development of business in and through the Hispanic community in the United States. This convention brings opportunities and challenges to Milwaukee. Why Milwaukee as a choice for the national convention?

The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Wisconsin, which is based in Milwaukee and led by executive director Maria Monreal Cameron, with the backing of an engaged board of directors, fought long and hard for the convention. Midwestern cities like Chicago and Cleveland mounted aggressive campaigns seeking this year's convention.

The Wisconsin chamber has proven itself -- it has been recognized as the chamber of the year for Region Four of USHCC, which consists of several Midwestern states, for nine consecutive years. And it had the help of several business and political leaders in getting the convention to Milwaukee.

Model city

The USHCC's choice of Milwaukee reflects the enormous population and economic growth of the Hispanic community that has occurred throughout the country. Milwaukee is representative of a number of places not generally associated with large Hispanic communities that have seen explosive Hispanic population gains.

Wisconsin saw a more than 100 percent increase in the Hispanic population between the 1990 and 2000 census. The city of Milwaukee has an estimated 79,000 Hispanics, according to the 2003 U.S. Census estimate, or about 14 percent of the population. While our overall population numbers in Milwaukee are stagnant or slowly slipping, the Hispanic population growth is robust. From 2000 to 2003, it is estimated the Hispanic population grew by more than 10 percent. The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Wisconsin counts more than 5,500 Hispanic-owned businesses in Wisconsin, with more to come.

The combined willingness of many new Hispanic arrivals to take entrepreneurial risks to improve their standard of living and the extremely high rate of work force participation by Hispanics make for a strong positive contribution to the local economy. The USHCC and Wisconsin chamber have sought to emphasize this economic impact; this convention will seek to further make the point.

Good start

The Wisconsin chamber is off to a good start in fund-raising to make this, the 26th USHCC convention, the best ever. There is still a need for more sponsors, and a need for more ideas on how to make the conventioners welcome to our city.

Furthermore, the USHCC convention occurs during the celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month. Milwaukee has a chance to use the convention as a launching pad for many other activities during Hispanic Heritage Month.

The national convention provides an opportunity for Milwaukee to offer itself as a great place to do business. A few years ago, Hispanics magazine rated Milwaukee as one of the top 10 cities for Hispanics to live and raise a family in the United States.

The message that Milwaukee is one of the best places for Hispanics to live and raise a family can be reaffirmed with a warm welcome to the convention. Our political, business and civic leadership should embrace the convention as one of the highlight events in Milwaukee this year.

While the convention offers opportunities, it also presents a challenge to Milwaukee, its institutions and people. The Wisconsin chamber is up to the challenge; are the rest of us up to it?

Jose Olivieri is a partner in the Milwaukee office of Michael Best & Friedrich L.L.P. and president of the United Community Center board of directors.

© 2005 American City Business Journals Inc.