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A new model for facility management

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By Kristi Casey Sanders

Team San Jose, in California, is unique among convention and visitors bureaus (CVBs). Like many CVBs, it manages the convention center and is responsible for promoting the city as a tourist and convention destination. The radical difference lies in how Team San Jose uses a partnership between labor unions, arts organizations, hoteliers, catering professionals, local businesses and the convention center staff to create a single point of contact for all new and returning customers throughout the entire sales and booking process.

"What Team San Jose provides is one-stop-shopping," says Sue Davis, director of special projects for the International Society for Optical Engineering. "That's a tremendous advantage and something that I think the rest of the cities are picking up or should pick up on."

"Usually, if you are using the convention center, you have a contract with them; and if you want to have a reception at the museum, you have a contract with them; and if you want to use the gallery, you have to contract with them," she explains. "But with Team San Jose, they're all contracted for at the same time. That's a huge time saver, huge."

The marriage of labor unions and corporate business (not to mention arts groups) seems odd at first. But Phaedra Ellis-Lamkins, executive officer of the South Bay Labor Council, says it was a partnership born of necessity. In December 2003, the City of San Jose put out a request for proposals for the management and operations of the San Jose McEnery Convention Center, the Civic Auditorium, Parkside Hall, South Hall, the Center for Performing Arts, the California Theatre and the Montgomery Theatre.

"[Team San Jose was formed] because there were challenges happening around the convention center, and there were two communities concerned about it: the business community and the labor community," Ellis-Lamkins says. "[The city was] talking about privatizing it, which was not something labor was behind, and Dan Fenton [president and chief executive officer of the CVB] and I got together to talk."

"The team became an option because we all agreed on what was wrong; we had the very same problems with the way the convention center was managed and operated; and we thought it was important that all of the groups meet ... and work out of a need for the greater good rather than our own institutional interests."

Team San Jose was formed as a public benefit corporation governed by local hospitality, organized labor and arts community leaders. In May 2004, it won the five-year contract to manage the city's major facilities.

Fenton says the CVB takes pride in the fact that labor is part of the team. "In towns like Chicago, there's a stigma about organized labor; that if you go to a place where there's organized labor, [everyone is treated

the same] — that it's more expensive, less flexible. [Here, labor unions] work with us on how to drive more business to the city. Because if we do more business, we grow more jobs, and that's their bottom line." As a result, Team San Jose gives planners the ability and support to negotiate terms with unions, and the danger of business being disrupted by labor disputes is slim — something that's important to planners booking events sometimes 10 years in advance.

Other CVBs, such as Dallas, Memphis and St. Paul, Minn., have been eyeing the Team San Jose model closely. Philip Jones, president and CEO of the Dallas CVB, says, "I think it's an innovative approach for the bureau to act with the convention center, and it's an achievement that generates best practices and maximizes limited resources. And, it seems like it's working. We also looked at Las Vegas and the San Diego model, where you have the convention center selling citywides and the CVB selling in-house business and leisure. The Team San Jose model was the one that stood out."

Ellis-Lamkins and Fenton say the biggest question people have is how they get all the city's leaders to sit down and work together. Ellis-Lamkins says, "I think you have to be committed to each other's success, have a supportive relationship and remind them about the bottom line. I know hotel folks and arts folks are thinking about how to make labor succeed, and I'm thinking: We've got to book hotel rooms."

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