

Can Boston be a truly visitor-friendly city?



MASS. MARKET

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Jim Rooney likes to say he's in the business of selling a destination, not a building.

That's why the 25-member "Convention Partnership" that Rooney is assembling won't just focus on expansion possibilities for the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center that Rooney oversees.

Sure, the physical expansion of the BCEC has been getting all the attention since the initiative was unveiled two weeks ago. But Rooney, the executive director of the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority, also wants the partnership to take a close look at ways to make this notoriously parochial city more hospitable and cosmopolitan while retaining its unique qualities.

Rooney gives the city's tourism industry high marks, but he says there's still room for improvement. Since the BCEC first opened the doors to its cavernous hall in 2004, Rooney says he has heard from meeting planners that Boston is still just learning how to become a big convention city.

The opening of the BCEC has moved Boston into the top 10 convention cities in North America. But Rooney wants Boston to crack the top five, to compete with the likes of New York and Orlando. Getting there will probably involve more than just adding extra exhibition space to the back of that massive convention hall on Summer Street. Rooney and others in the industry are already talking about some tangible ideas.

Make it easier to eat and drink at the city's restaurants and bars:

Rooney says he would like to open a

dialogue regarding the relatively early closure of many restaurants' kitchens, something that can make it hard for conventioners to find a place to grab dinner after 10 p.m. Rooney also says he would like to address complaints he's heard that many bars and lounges require a Massachusetts license to get a drink, which poses a bit of a problem to a visitor from Spain or Sweden.

Improve late-night transportation:

We all know the T closes up shop between 12:15 and 1 a.m. (depending on the stop). At least there's always a taxi around, right? Well, not exactly. Hailing a cab can get tougher once the T stops running, and you might as well not even try if you're still looking for one when the bars empty out.

Make the South Boston waterfront more attractive to visitors: The area around the convention center has changed faster than any other part of the city in the past decade. But it still hasn't come close to reaching the critical mass of, say, the area in the Back Bay near the Hynes Convention Center. There are a few hotels and plenty of good restaurants, but the waterfront still has an underdeveloped, windswept feel with its vast parking lots and numerous highway ramps. Several key developments – including the much-needed Waterside

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Place retail complex across Summer Street from the BCEC – have been slowed by the frozen credit markets. As the economy improves, we'll see the bulldozers return.

The MCCA is also considering ways to improve access between the convention center and the nearby Fort Point neighborhood. The district still has a decent-sized artists' community and a growing number of distinctive eateries tucked into its numerous brick warehouses. Hopefully, the current economic slowdown has curbed the disappointing trend of converting the artists' studios into boring office space.

Add new entertainment options: This one comes from Pat Moscaritolo, the CEO



of the Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau. He says Boston doesn't need theme parks, but it does need more than sports bars. Specifically, Moscaritolo thinks a resort casino at the Suffolk Downs racetrack in his neighborhood, East Boston, would help position Boston as a world-class convention destination. We're talking about a 10-minute drive through the Ted Williams tunnel between Suffolk and the **BCEC**. The Legislature still needs to legalize casino gambling, but the issue will most likely be on the Beacon Hill agenda for 2010.

Capitalize on the Boston Harbor: For a city that was largely built up out of the ocean, Boston doesn't take full advantage of its waterfront location. Moscaritolo envisions more water taxis that could better connect Southie with places such as downtown, the North End and Charlestown for a distinctly Boston experience.

Those are just a few tangible ideas. But Rooney would like to discuss other changes as well, such as how locals interact with tourists. He suggests possibly organizing training sessions for all the city's hospitality workers, much like the classes that convention workers are required to attend, and finding ways to boost the local restaurant and hotel industry so it's seen by more people as a career opportunity.

Rooney also would like to try "experience audits" in which a dozen or so visitors are asked to keep track of their

experiences in Boston from the moment they get off the plane until their departure.

The convention center expansion is by no means a sure thing. A major addition would likely need a new piece of legislation and, of course, a funding source.

Paul Guzzi, who will co-chair the convention partnership with Rooney, says he is going into this with an open mind. Guzzi says pushing for the BCEC's creation was one of the first things he did as CEO of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce. But he wants to make sure that there will be enough convention business to warrant another big investment. The number of trade shows has remained essentially flat at the BCEC for the past three years, largely because of the recession.

However, Guzzi says adding enough exhibit space so Boston can handle all but the biggest conventions would be one way to accomplish the somewhat amorphous goal of making Boston a more cosmopolitan city.

Even if a pricey BCEC addition never gets built, the partnership's discussions won't be wasted. This is the right time to figure out how the rest of the world views us, regardless of whether we like what we see.

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