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Hilton Garden Inn adds to Ames' hospitality industry

By Kathy Hanson, Special to The Tribune

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When the Hilton Garden Inn opened in January, it boosted Ames' hotel bed capacity to 1,400 rooms. Ames Convention and Visitors Bureau Director Julie Weeks said that number might sound lofty for a community the size of Ames, but she views it as an achievement.

In the past, during the peak months that "fill up" with events around the Iowa State University calendar, for example, some guests have been forced to find accommodations in Ankeny and Des Moines.

According to Weeks, one thing the hospitality industry in Ames has going for it is its ability to negotiate the peaks and valleys forged by the community's mix of major events, college athletics, graduations, conferences, entertainment events and individual and corporate travelers.

Ames benefits from the Iowa State Center in the slower months to draw special events that require multipurpose venues, such as Special Olympics and Iowa Games.

Its ideal target market is another bonus to Ames' hospitality industry, according to Frederick Killian, local general manager of the Grandstay Residential Suites Hotel. The Grandstay chain specializes in offering nightly, weekly and monthly accommodations in metro areas such as Ames with populations of 40,000 to 60,000 that are homes to state colleges and boast significant corporate business as well.

Killian said Ames has more than the right demographic profile to contribute to success in the hospitality industry. It benefits from its willingness to "huddle" for cross-venue collaboration and teamwork with the Ames Convention and Visitors Bureau, for example, and from its genuine understanding of the needs of its guests.

The Grandstay is the only hospitality property in Ames designed to handle extended stays for traveling sales staff and contractors, Killian said. It complements the array of services offered by conventional hotels and motels and does a steady business with corporate travelers also looking for off-site interview and business retreat sites.

His only concern about the hospitality industry in Ames is the Hilton Garden Inn adding a second full-service hotel to a market this size.

"Only time will tell if the market will support two full-service hotels with banquet and conference capabilities like the Hilton Garden Inn and the Gateway (Hotel and Convention Center)," he said.

Jean McBreen, Gateway's general manager, thinks the Gateway will continue to thrive because it has a reputation and an edge in the market as the "only International Association of Conference Centers certified conference center in Iowa."

Weeks said the Ames Convention and Visitors Bureau provides a resource to Ames hotels and motels not all communities enjoy. For example, the bureau is adding new marketing features for group and individual promotions and hotel packages to its Web site.

"We've also taken a hard look at 2009, and worked hard to get commitments from our usual, annual special events," to hedge a possible slump in individual travelers caused by the current economic downturn, she said.

"Look for some new sports attractions next year, as well," Weeks said, adding that overall, she thinks the hospitality industry in Ames has reason to be optimistic about the future.

With a fresh infusion of energy stemming from the premiere of the Farm Progress Show last year, for example, 2008 went into the record books as a banner year for hotel and motel taxes, she said.

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