



By: Angie Hatton

Paducah's Convention & Expo Center

Where can you host a mixed martial arts exhibition, a home and garden show, a high school prom, a 50-person business conference, a fancy dinner party for 1,800, a wedding reception, a Japanese taiko drum band, and the Radio-Active City Roller Girls roller derby? You guessed it, the Julian Carroll Convention Center and Paducah Expo Center.

OK, let's do some rumor control. The Executive Inn is set for demolition in October. Convention and Expo Center Director Patrick Kerr said, when I spoke with him, the question he gets asked most often is, "When is the convention center getting torn down?" The simple answer, according to Kerr, "It's not, ever." At least, in the foreseeable future. Kerr said the second biggest misconception is that the place is a dump. The convention center was in limbo for some time while negotiations about hotel ownership were ongoing. Now, Kerr said, "We've undergone a \$4 million renovation." Inside, the convention and expo centers look brand new, ready for people and businesses to book them.

Kerr has been in his position since last October. He said, in that time, the convention center has branched out, hosting local business conferences in their meeting rooms, luncheons in the remodeled lobby, and, in their ballroom, the only U.S. Senate Democratic primary debate in western Kentucky. When I visited Kerr, the convention center was swarming with over 2,000 attendees for the annual OMGcon, a conference and exhibition for lovers of Japanese anime, manga, and video games. At the same time, in the main ballroom, 500 guests were expected that night for an up-scale wedding reception. "If you have anything over 200 people, there's nowhere else to go in Paducah," Kerr said. The convention center's rooms encompass 40,000 square feet, and the expo center measures an additional 40,000 square feet.

July 1 marked the first time the convention center has had an outlined operating budget. Before last year, the Convention Center Board "hired" the Executive Inn management to run the operation. "We didn't even have an address," explained Kerr. "Everything was tied to the hotel." The estimated budget for 2010-2011 for the center is a little more than a million dollars. A portion of the local transient room

tax goes to fund the convention and expo center, but Kerr said this year that wasn't enough to cover everything. The city and county have each pitched in \$125,000 to supplement the tax revenue. According to Kerr, a portion of that will fund some equipment updates. "The [previous] renovation didn't include new tables and chairs," he said. New furniture and event equipment means more comfort and efficiency.

To get the word out about the changes at the convention center, Kerr plans to implement a marketing campaign with money from the new budget. An updated website will allow potential renters to check dates and view rooms online. At the website, www.paducahconventions.com, you can sign up for a monthly newsletter that includes articles, event information, and reminders about upcoming booking opportunities. Kerr said he works to be flexible with potential clients. The convention center accepts any licensed caterer, and those with liquor licenses may bring in alcohol.

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He said booking rates vary by size of group, rooms needed, and time of year. Kerr also promoted a special one-time advantage for non-profits. They can hold a board meeting at no charge, and groups taking advantage of that can even get an additional 10% off their next event in addition to a typical 15% non-profit discount.

The Executive Inn hotel site is expected to be cleared by March 2011. Contractors plan to take apart the building piece by piece rather than implode it (the area was deemed unsafe for that operation). While heavy machinery will be next door, Kerr is confident the work won't disturb any events. "They'll mostly be working during the daytime, and our events are usually at night or on the weekend," he explained. However, if the schedules clash, Kerr said he can ask contractors to work on the far end of the hotel, or pause entirely for a day.

Until a new hotel moves into the old "Big E" spot, activities at the convention and expo center will likely remain pretty steady. According to Kerr, major changes aren't expected for at least two years. In the meantime, he hopes the location can attract more high-end events and regional conferences. He admitted without a large hotel sitting next to it, the convention center may not have the appeal of large, national conferences. But he's not letting that hold them back. If the recent line-up is any indication, the convention center has proven it can make it work.

If you or your business is interested in booking the convention and expo center, contact Patrick Kerr at 270-408-1346 or patrick.kerr@paducahconventions.com. See more online at www.paducahconventions.com. ✦

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UPCOMING EVENTS

July 13: The Paducah Symphony Orchestra WOW Family Concert Series featuring Brass. 7 pm. For more information, contact the PSO at 444-0065.

August 14: The Radioactive City Roller Girls. 7 pm. The local roller derby team hosts its first of four bouts this season.

August 28: Harold Dick Promotions presents Mixed Martial Arts Wrestling. 7 pm.