

## **AQCA Monthly Membership Meeting Notes**

Thursday, April 17, 2008, 7:00pm (122 Chestnut)

### **Guest speakers:**

Mary Kay Wydra, President, and Todd Greenwood, VP of Convention Center Sales and Marketing, Greater Springfield Convention & Visitors Bureau

Robert Louder called the meeting to order and made several short announcements, including a reminder about the May 10th Walking Tour which will feature Keith Korbut, automotive historian. The May 15th AQCA meeting will feature Jeff Keck of the Springfield Business Improvement District. Bob also put out a call for volunteers to help with the May 3rd *Keep Springfield Beautiful* event, as well as the May 17th Pancake Breakfast.

Robert introduced Charlie Contant, the president of *Keep Springfield Beautiful*, who reviewed some of the impressive statistics from last year's event.

### **Mary Kay Wydra**

Mary Kay, a resident of Classical Condos, is president of the Greater Springfield Convention & Visitors Bureau (GSCVB,) one of 13 regional councils in the state, which primarily covers Hampden and Hampshire counties (and a bit of Franklin county, in that they market the Pioneer Valley as a whole). Mary Kay spoke about the "big business" of tourism in our region: of the approximately 23 million visitors to the state in FY06, about 13% came to Western Mass. and there are about 4,500 jobs supported here by tourism. The GSCVB's 1.9 million dollar annual budget is made up of a state grant for marketing, dues from their 325 business members, and revenue from advertisements in their regional guidebooks and coupon book.

In marketing the region to prospective visitors, the GSCVB places ads in Boston area, CT, and NY publications. They also send representatives to various conventions, and make sales calls to group tour operators. Our region is apparently getting more attention in recent years from bus tours thanks to more aggressive advertising.

The GSCVB supports the region's hospitality industry by offering training to smaller hotels, and by sponsoring the annual "Howdy Awards" to recognize and encourage good service. They also maintain an "Ambassador Corps" of volunteers which help primarily with hospitality for convention-goers.

The GSCVB also operates the two downtown Visitor Centers - one at the Banknorth building, and the other next to the Basketball Hall of Fame.

**Todd Greenwood** is a recent recruit from Indianapolis, where the downtown was slowly but surely transformed, in part thanks to a successful “convention industry.” Mary Kay introduced him as the "real deal," and stressed how lucky we are to have him in charge of marketing the convention center.

Convention planners typically look at three things when comparing sites: the meeting place itself, travel + access, and recreational opportunities. In general, Springfield's top selling points to convention planners are its affordability and cultural uniqueness. Todd and his team of marketers pitch the Mass Mutual Center to large conventions (250+ attendees; planned well over a year in advance), medium-sized group (150+) and short term events. The Boston convention center folks have been supportive in sharing marketing strategies, and making referrals. In making their decisions, convention planners usually make “site visits,” when Todd and his team paint the best possible picture of Springfield and its offerings. Springfield is attractive as a smaller city setting, because of the “big fish in a little pond” effect - conventions get more coverage in the newspaper than they would in a large city, the Mayor might greet them, etc. In addition to wooing convention planners, the GSCVB also works with local businesses, particularly restaurants, to plan for increased traffic. Todd spoke of the “chicken and the egg” problem of convincing restaurants to open for more hours for conventioners - which comes first, the restaurants or the conventions?

Todd talked about the industry in Indianapolis, and how it took over 10 years to fully develop, at which time many new restaurants had opened, and over 20,000 new residents had migrated back downtown. The Mass Mutual Center is currently operating at about 55% occupancy, and the goal of 2 major conventions a month has not yet been met, but it has only been a couple years since the Center opened for business. Todd projected that at least one more year of marketing and getting established is needed before the Center could be expected to be fully on track.

**Next monthly meeting** will be Thursday, May 15<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 pm, location TBA.

Notes submitted by Anna Brandenburg, AQCA Secretary