HALL of FAME

The Atlanta Convention & Visitors Bureau honors its 2008 inductees

Spurgeon Richardson

George McKeever

Abner Nelms

Lodging trend
Local hoteliers such as Rahim Charania are finding it necessary to go green to cater to their customers.

King Tut
Emory University's Michael C. Carlos Museum is looking forward to hosting an exhibit on the Egyptian pharaoh on Nov. 15.

Tourism traffic
Local tourist sites saw a slight dip in visitors last year, and expect continued softness this year.
Small museum takes spotlight with Tut exhibit

By Anya Martin

In 2005, when Peter Lacovara heard that the Egyptian government was planning a new tour of treasures from the tomb of the ancient pharaoh Tutankhamun, he asked his old friend Zahi Hawass, secretary general of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, if he would send that exhibit to Emory University's Michael C. Carlos Museum.

"Zahi said all the slots were full, but we should be patient," said Lacovara, the Carlos' senior curator of ancient Egyptian, Nubian and Near Eastern art.

That patience paid off with the small university museum securing the coveted first spot on the tour of a second, larger exhibition — "Tutankhamun: The Golden King and the Great Pharaohs." The exhibition includes 156 objects not only from the boy king's celebrated tomb but also from other important rulers spanning 2,000 years of history from 2560 B.C. to 660 B.C., many of which have never been to the United States before.

Long-term relationship building, creative problem-solving and luck were key to the Carlos bringing Tutankhamun to Atlanta, which never hosted the original exhibition of Tut artifacts that toured America in the 1970s.

That earlier event "rewrote the book" on defining a blockbuster exhibition, said Mark Lach, senior vice president of Aurora, Ohio-based Arts and Exhibitions International LLC (AEI), which is staging the traveling exhibition along with National Geographic.

The Tutankhamun exhibition, which opens Nov. 15 and runs through May 25 at the Atlanta Civic Center, and "The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army," another high-profile archaeology exhibition running Nov. 16 through April 19 at the High Museum of Art, together could reap Atlanta $150 million in economic impact, said Mark Vaughan, executive vice president of the Atlanta Convention & Visitors Bureau.

The odyssey to Tut started with Carlos director Bonnie Speed receiving a call in July 2006 from Andres Nunnemaker, president of Museum Consulting Services Inc. and an AEI consultant, who had been instructed by Hawass to offer the exhibition to the Carlos.

"I said, 'Yes, of course, we want it,'" Speed said. "Then we all sat down and said, 'Where do we put this?'"

Even if the Carlos emptied all its permanent collections from its galleries, the space would be insufficient, she said.

Several locations were considered, but only one seemed large enough, was centrally located and offered adequate parking — the former SciTrek Museum next to the Civic Center, which had hosted "Bodies" and "Titanic: The Artifact Exhibition," Speed said.

But both the Civic Center and the SciTrek spaces are scheduled for demolition in spring 2008 to be replaced with a new performing arts center and mixed-use community, she said.

Speed said she called Charles Ackerman, chairman of the Carlos' board of advisers and founder of Atlanta-based real estate development firm Ackerman & Co., to ask his advice.

What Speed did not realize was that Ackerman & Co. held the property's lease, and faced with a shaky real estate market and the chance to bring a high-profile exhibit to Atlanta, Ackerman said he did not hesitate to postpone those projects.

The Carlos' ability to land this exhibition is thanks to Lacovara's reputation as an Egyptologist and a more than 20-year relationship with Hawass that goes back to student days long before the latter became Egypt's highest officer in charge of antiquities, Speed said.

Another strategic move was the 1999 acquisition of an Egyptian collection from a Niagara Falls oddity museum, which included what most experts agree is the missing mummy of Pharaoh Ramses I.

The Carlos received international news coverage for returning the royal body to Egypt in 2005, earning more goodwill from Hawass, Speed said.

Lacovara and Carlos staff also have participated in many excavations in Egypt and helped redesign a gallery at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

The Carlos will receive only $1 per ticket after the first 500,000 tickets are sold, but the "little museum that could" hopes it will gain much more in stature and community awareness, Speed said.

Its biggest challenges now include raising money for educational programs during the exhibition's run, as well as a concurrent exhibition at its main location of photographs taken by Harry Burton of the 1922 expedition that discovered King Tutankhamun's almost-intact tomb, Speed said.