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## Metro Detroit event venues weathered the pandemic. Here's how



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In late February 2020, the Great Lakes Comic Convention drew thousands of attendees shortly before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Last weekend marked a reunion of sorts as comic, toy and collectibles fans gathered at Macomb Community College's Sports and Expo Center in Warren for the first convention in two years. Unlike years past, attendees were greeted with a mask required sign.

"We've had a hiatus like everybody," said Mike DeSantis, founder of the Great Lakes Comic Convention.

The expo center is among dozens of conference centers, banquet halls and event venues throughout Metro Detroit seeing an increase in event bookings after months of cancellations and postponements due to the pandemic. Some venues have coped with limited capacity for in-person events and held hybrid functions, an option that's likely to continue as the pandemic's effects linger.

"I believe that people are finally in a position now where they're starting to say we can start getting back to normal and we can start hosting these meetings and feel confident that we can do so safely," said Claude Molinari, president and CEO of the Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Ticket sales for this year's comic convention were 25% higher than in 2020, with 3,000 people attending on Friday, DeSantis said.

"I think that's happening to a lot of places as things are opening up again, people are anxious to get out," he said. "Spend some money."

Last month, Visit Detroit announced 100 new meetings and sporting events worth more than \$200 million in economic activity headed to the region beginning this year. One of the biggest is the NCAA Division I Wrestling Championships March 17-19 at Little Caesars Arena.

Ashlee Willis, CEO of Michigan Premier Events LLC, said as organizations and venues work together to manage events, there's been flexibility from all parties involved.

"A lot of the venue spaces are basically accommodating what organizations need," she said. "One of the things they're focused on are how many people are in attendance so they can accommodate with their staff."

One option some venues turned to was a hybrid arrangement, with some attendees on-site for an event while others watched remotely. For example, an awards program might have the presenters and nominees on-site while the audience is virtual.

Those types of adjustments have helped event operators navigate the pandemic's challenges.

"It's working together as a team making sure if the event needs to postpone, that happens," Willis said. "If the event needs to be virtual or hybrid, the venues do their best to accommodate the hybrid. Especially having different rooms and being real creative about that. Organizations right now are doing their best to keep engagement with the attendees."

When the One Campus Martius Event Space in Detroit opened for the first time in early 2020, the venue held one event before closing its doors shortly afterward.

Since reopening last summer, the 7,800-square-foot venue on the building's 16th floor has been the site of numerous events, a mix of in-person and hybrid functions.

Julie Glenn, director of event sales for Rock Central, which operates the venue, said it was exciting when "we could loosen restrictions and folks could come in and gather again."

The One Campus Martius Event Space has hybrid events booked through April, including award shows for its internal family of companies. One notable hybrid event it held recently was the World Economic Forum's Urban Transformation Summit in December.

“The hybrid option was a way that we could bring together a community of Detroiters plus individuals who were generally in the United States or had fairly easy access to get to Detroit and to enable a broad global audience to participate online,” said Jeff S. Merritt, head of Urban Transformation.

“This was one of the small hybrid or even in-person event the forum has had over the past two years. I’m incredibly happy that we had the courage to insist on an in-person component ... I think it ended up being a win-win. I don’t think if we would have just done it in person or just done a virtual we would have been happy with the outcome.”

Merritt said the human interaction of those who are in person during a hybrid function made it a more natural experience for those participating virtually.

“It’s so much more complicated doing a hybrid event,” he said. “If everyone is virtual, it’s fairly straightforward.”

Karen Tamley, president and CEO of Access Living in Chicago, spoke remotely on a panel during the transformation summit in December. The nonprofit leader, who has used a manual wheelchair for almost all of her life, advocates for smart, accessible cities and digital inclusion for people with disabilities.

"It was fascinating to be in my home office and at the same time, in conversation with fellow panelists who were in the room at a large conference," she said.

Tamley said while technology allowed her to convey the information she wanted to share, she missed the opportunity to see the audience, assess the mood and meet fellow panelists in-person.

"Overall, I do think hybrid conferences are great opportunities to open doors for people to hear and learn from a diversity of speakers across the globe who may not be able to travel to conferences due to schedule, cost, travel restrictions, disability or other factors," she said. "There was something missing from that human interaction you don’t get as a virtual speaker at a hybrid conference."

Willis said she sees organizations incorporating hybrid components for future events to include more participants.

“People are now seeing how more inclusive hybrid is,” she said. “It’s more of a broader outreach of audience ... It’s that accessibility.”

Even with a hybrid option in place, some continue to crave a return to in-person events, said Karen Totaro, general manager of Huntington Place in downtown Detroit. The convention center continues to offer a hybrid option, but its usage has fallen over time, she said.

"The more popular was the hybrid with a mix of in-person and virtual, and that will continue as events learned they can expand their attendance numbers by offering at least some aspects of their conference virtually," she said. "The one thing that came out of COVID that gives me great encouragement for the future is people want connection, in-person, human contact connection and nothing, including a pandemic, eliminates that strong desire. There will always be a need for convention centers, arenas, stadiums and performing art centers."

Bedrock says its wedding season will kick off in May with events booked each weekend at One Campus Martius. It also has booked a mixture of corporate and social events at the Madison building on Broadway, State Savings Bank on Fort Street and ICON along the Detroit River in the former UAW-GM training center.

Visit Detroit recently announced a national marketing campaign, "Detroit Wins," at its Annual Partnership Meeting, highlighting all of the new meetings and sporting events booked during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among them are the Automate conference in June at Huntington Place, and Connect, a gathering of 4,000 corporate planners and suppliers, in August at the downtown Detroit convention center.

Molinari said the campaign lets meeting planners and sports organizers know that the city and region are open for business. It's also for local residents to consider bringing their own company meetings as well as their fraternal, social and association events to the region, he said.

At the Macomb Community College Sports and Expo Center in Warren, activity resumed in fall 2021.

In addition to the Great Lakes Comic Convention, nearly all of the expo center's recurring customers have returned to their normal event time frames, center officials said. Other events include the Michigan State Numismatic Society Spring Convention & Coin Show April 8-10, the Macomb Science Olympiad for middle and high school students March 19 and the Greater Detroit Gem, Mineral and Fossil Show Oct. 7-9.

The expo center implemented new cleaning procedures, added hand sanitizing stations and converted to hands-free drinking fountains, officials said. There are also plans this fall to add air conditioning and improved ventilation.

Alicia Andrikides, sales representative with Burton Manor in Livonia, said they've almost returned to their pre-pandemic booking levels. This past September, the venue had more events than in September 2019, she said.

"After having been locked down for so long, all these parties are wanting to come back," she said. "People are wanting to get out of the house again."

Andrikides said although things aren't completely back to normal, follow-up calls to larger trade and vendor shows have resulted in bookings for multiple years.

“We’re seeing a good retention,” she said.

Huntington Place remained busy at the onset of the pandemic with its FEMA field hospital, vaccine distribution and testing, as well as absentee ballot counting, said Totaro, the convention center's general manager. The venue hosted numerous traditional events in 2021 under restrictions, including President’s Day Volleyball last February and CannaCon in June.

Totaro said that through multiple pandemic surges, the venue was in a difficult position of opening and then closing down due to health restrictions imposed by the state or city.

So far, there have been no cancellations for upcoming shows for the spring, Totaro said. The venue is preparing for the return of the North American International Auto Show in September.

“It looks like things will start to return in March 2022, and thereafter looking very much like a full schedule,” she said, adding while booking pace has varied the past two years, “we were successful in booking events for the future throughout the pandemic.”

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