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As capacity limits rise today, convention business gets back to work

CHAD LIVENGOOD  



TCF Center

TCF Center on Detroit's riverfront has seven events booked in June, when limits on indoor capacity rise to 50 percent. As of July 1, all restrictions will be lifted.

When Gov. Gretchen Whitmer announced mid-day May 20 that all coronavirus restrictions on event capacities will go away July 1, the phones started ringing at [TCF Center's](#) sales department.

By day's end, an unnamed company had booked a 15,000-employee holiday party in December, said Karen Totaro, general manager of TCF Center.

"Our director of sales came down the hallway doing back flips," Totaro said.

Today marks the first step toward the return of something that resembles pre-pandemic normalcy: Capacity limits for all public-facing businesses are raised to 50 percent for the month of June. By July 1, the governor has said 15 months of capacity limits for indoor venues will be eliminated.

That has already set off a flurry of business activity for convention venues around the state as trade associations and corporations have rushed to put into motion plans to hold summer meetings, while trade shows and other groups firm up plans for fall conventions, industry officials say.

"When the governor made the announcement, our phones started ringing right away," Totaro told Crain's. "For meeting planners, they need that real number. So July 1, that was real to them and they could start planning events."

At Detroit's riverfront convention center, June is the jumping off point for the restart.



TCF Center

"When the governor made the announcement (about lifting capacity limits), our phones started ringing right away," said Karen Totaro, general manager of TCF Center in Detroit.

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TCF Center has seven events booked in June, including a business-to-business cannabis industry convention called CannaCon that runs June 25-26 and the summerlong Beyond Van Gogh immersive digital and interactive display of artist Vincent van Gogh's masterpieces.

"They're expecting about 100,000 people over the three-month period," Totaro said of the van Gogh art installation. "It's a very good way to start."

In recent weeks, the sales team at TCF Center has started getting calls from convention planners for booking meetings and expositions into 2022 and 2023 for industries as varied as design molding to systems engineering.

"What all of this tells us is the doors really are open because they're different types of events," Totaro said. "It's not like we're just getting small athletic events or trade shows."

One drawback about the late May announcement is most major business meetings need three months of planning "runway," said Claude Molinari, president and CEO of the Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau.

"If we had known three months ago that July 1 you're in the game, there was certainly business we could have gone after," said Molinari, who previously was general manager of TCF Center.



Claude Molinari

Molinari is optimistic about 2022 after TCF Center recently booked five major conventions that will fill 40,000 hotel rooms throughout next year.

The Automate Show, a trade show for the robotics, motion control and other automation technologies, had planned to hold its show in Detroit in 2021, 2023 and 2025, Molinari said.

After the 2021 show got scratched due to the pandemic, planners called and asked if they could reschedule for May 2022, Molinari said, intensifying the convention and trade show schedule next

spring at TCF Center.

"One of the challenges we'll have at TCF Center is sequencing everything in in 2022," he said.



TCF Center

Organizers of the North American International Auto Show held a small outdoor event outside TCF Center in downtown Detroit in October.