

## Detroit auto show's return hailed as success

### Organizers don't release ticket sales but say event planned for next Sept.

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Organizers of the Detroit auto show say the return of this year's event after a more than three-year hiatus was successful with "hundreds of thousands" of attendees, and they expect to stick to a September show in 2023.

The North American International Auto Show historically has trumpeted attendance by journalists, dignitaries and members of the public, but the Detroit Automobile Dealers Association declined to provide a ticket sales count for the reimagined 2022 show that brought out President Joe Biden and included indoor attractions as well as outdoor activities that previously weren't available when the show was held in winter.

The show's new format also made an attendance count a little more complex. DADA President Thad Szott told The Detroit News he is "fairly confident" the show had more attendees than the 300,000-to-500,000 organizers had anticipated, between the free outdoor events in Hart Plaza and ticketed enticements there and on the show floor at the Huntington Place convention center. Pinpointing a specific number of attendees is difficult, Szott said, since the organization didn't track how many people went to the outdoor activities and since a family pass gets in five people with just one ticket. The show's Charity Preview gala had 6,500 attendees, which he said was more than anticipated, raising more than \$2 million.

"We pulled off what we wanted to pull off," Szott said, "which is bringing the show back, resetting it, reimagining it, getting manufacturers where they're engaged to come back again another year, feeding the restaurants, feeding the hotels, feeding the businesses downtown, trying out this new month, and all those boxes were checked."

The Detroit Metro Convention and Visitors Bureau says it still is collecting data on the economic impact of the show,

but the week ending Sept. 18 led to almost \$30 million in hotel stay revenue for the region — the highest seven-day period in the history of southeast Michigan, spokesman Chris Moyer said in a statement. That included the auto show's media, industry and first consumer days and the charity gala as well as The Battery Show at the Suburban Collection Showplace in Novi and Crain Communications Inc.'s Detroit Homecoming.

But the show wasn't a boon for all local businesses. Joe Vicari, owner of Joe Muer Seafood and Andiamo in the Renaissance Center downtown, said the show "really did not do anything for our business." In previous years, "that was the busiest week of the year," he said.

When the auto show took place in January, the two restaurants would see 1,000 guests on Charity Preview night, according to Vicari. This year, they had a total of about 170.

"I'm not knocking anything," he said. "I don't know if they'll bring it back there, but I think when they had it in the wintertime, people didn't have a whole lot to do and that would be something to do."

In past years, the DADA has supplied specific participation figures for the show and the economic impact of the event. After the last show ended in January 2019, the group said nearly 775,000 people visited, infusing the regional economy with more than \$430 million — roughly the equivalent of a Super Bowl.

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"You get skeptical when someone who used to brag about their numbers stops revealing them and says they're great," Erik Gordon, a professor at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, said in an email.

Still, he said: "The old format worked for years but that doesn't make it the best format today or tomorrow. Kudos to the organizers for experimenting."

Brent Snively, vice president of media relations for Detroit-based communications firm Franco and a former business and automotive journalist, said in an email that the "general consensus among media and analy-

sts that attended the show is that NAIAS is no longer the major international media and news event that it once was and is unlikely to regain that mantle anytime soon."

"However, it has become and can continue to be a very interesting and relevant regional event for consumers — for families and car buyers who are interested in an entertaining morning or afternoon," he added. "That means the attendance figures for the event are more important than ever and will become the new measuring stick of the show's success."

Still, it would be "unfair" to compare this year's attendance to peak attendance of more than 800,000 years ago, he said, given the change in timing and the fact that previous shows took place over a longer period.

The show previously was set to take place in June 2020, but the COVID-19 pandemic halted and altered those plans. In 2021, organizers opted to have an outdoor Motor Bella event at the MI Concourse in Pontiac instead of a Detroit show. To put on this year's show, the state of Michigan provided a \$9 million grant, and the city offered organizational support to help it happen.

Organizers are "90-plus percent" certain Detroit's auto show will take place in September next year, Szott said: "We have already started making plans with Huntington Place for dates in September."

Karen Totaro, general manager of Huntington Place and operator ASM Global, says the center is in the midst of negotiations for the auto show in 2023 and beyond. The show in previous years has been its largest revenue generator.

"We were thrilled to host the comeback of the Detroit Auto Show in 2022!" Totaro said in a statement. "It is the beginning of a whole new mobility focused



event, and it will continue to grow year over year. We loved seeing the crowds back in the building and especially enjoying all the new activations.”

The DADA is talking to manufacturers to see what dates work best and what to improve for next year’s show. The ride-and-drive features might be one area to reexamine, Szott said, since consumers had to wait sometimes hours for the experience.

“The rides and experiences were wildly successful for the manufacturers creating excitement and the consumers very much embraced them,” he said. “I would like us to expand that next year and get more manufacturers involved with those experiences.”

In a trend accelerated by the pandemic, automakers have adapted their marketing plans for new products, utilizing live virtual events and commercials to reach millions. This year, while dealing with major supply constraints and increased costs, many major manufacturers sat out on participating in the Detroit show with their own displays. Suppliers, startups and dealers filled in on the show floor. Detroit’s own General Motors Co., Ford Motor Co. and Stellantis NV all had their own displays along with Subaru Corp. and Toyota Motor Corp. Volkswagen AG had outside ride-and-

drives.

GM spokesperson Sabin Blake said in a statement: “GM had a great show from hosting the President of the United States in two of our vehicles to being named Detroit News Readers’ Choice Best In Show for the Corvette Z06, we’re looking forward to next year’s show.”

Biden’s visit helped NAIAS’s national and global exposure, Szott said. U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg also attended the show.

“There’s some manufacturers that are sitting back, scratching their heads, trying to figure out why they weren’t in this year,” he said. “Especially when we got the leadership of Washington in here.”

During his show floor tour, Biden met with GM CEO Mary Barra, GM President Mark Reuss, Ford Chairman Bill Ford and Stellantis CEO Carlos Tavares. He drove a Cadillac Lyriq electric crossover and started up a Corvette

“There’s some CEOs that were a little upset that they didn’t come to the party,” Szott said. “It’s good for us for next year.”

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