Case: Re-establishing Business Travel in Arlington, Virginia After September 11th, 2001 Pentagon Attacks

COMMUNITY PROFILE

Arlington, Virginia, is a city of 212,000 just southwest of Washington, D.C. Arlington is consistently ranked as one of the most-educated and highest-earning cities in the nation. Home to the Pentagon, Arlington has a significant business travel industry. Leisure travelers account for a quarter of visitors. Arlington National Cemetery is a major tourism anchor. Arlington’s tourism industry is also boosted by its close proximity to Washington, D.C., as well as its central position in the D.C. metro area.

DISASTER AND IMPACT ON ARLINGTON

Arlington was directly affected by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, when terrorists hijacked and flew a commercial airplane into the Pentagon, killing 189 people. The community, including Arlington Economic Development (AED), quickly mobilized to respond to this unprecedented disaster. Immediate efforts were concentrated on helping victims and their families, as well as on preparing for possible further attacks. By the evening of September 11, AED had arranged for hotels to accommodate families of survivors and victims.

As a precautionary step, Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport was shut down, with plans to remain shut for a substantial amount of time. As expected, this closure had a significant impact on the tourism market in neighboring Crystal City, as well as the commercial districts scattered throughout Arlington.

TOURISM RECOVERY EFFORTS

Immediate Pro-active Steps in the Wake of the Emergency

In the wake of the attack, AED and other area agencies acted with unprecedented urgency to meet the immediate needs of the community. AED secured a hotel that offered free space to house the DOD Family Assistance Center, which provided counseling to the families of victims and also coordinated real estate for FEMA and displaced Pentagon personnel. Within a few

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days, AED drafted an economic recovery plan and launched a Business Recovery Center as part of the plan.

Critical Advocacy Work to Restore Airport Service

A major hurdle to restoring tourism was the closing of Ronald Reagan National Airport. AED gathered crucial data regarding the airport’s economic impact and engaged in a two-week campaign to reopen the airport. In the meantime, AED devised a free bus route that carried visitors from Dulles International Airport to metro stops near Arlington-area hotels. The involvement of congressional representatives was effective in expediting the reopening of the airport.

Moving from Short- to Long-term Recovery Efforts

Once pressing needs were met, the focus became long-term recovery. The Arlington Convention and Visitors Service (ACVS), run out of AED, proposed a hospitality recovery program and secured $150,000 in funding from the Arlington County Board for disaster-related tourism marketing. During the first half of 2002, ACVS ran print media in ten surrounding states, online advertising, and promoted Arlington tourism at special events. ACVS also set up an advertising partnership with Texaco-Shell utilizing point-of-purchase exposure and radio placements. In total, media exposure from all sources totaled nearly $143 million.

The Arlington Visitors Center was opened in 2003 with a $500,000 grant from EDA and the leadership of the Arlington County Board. The center served over 20,000 visitors each year to the Arlington and Washington, D.C. region between its opening and 2010, when it was closed after research showed that fewer than two percent of the county’s visitors frequented the center. The ACVS implemented new strategies, such as rolling concierges on Segways and touch-screen information kiosks. This approach worked well with Arlington’s decentralized structure of “urban villages” centered around metro stations. In fall 2010, Arlington will launch its Mobile Visitors Center, a “green” electric vehicle that will frequent Arlington’s major hotel neighborhoods and special events.

After 9/11, the greater Washington area invested a total of $3.1 billion in 28 attractions and visitor infrastructure. Arlington itself saw the construction of the Air Force Memorial, the Pentagon Memorial, Arlington International High-Tech Conference Center, Arlington Heritage Center, Arlington Visitors Center, and the Arlington Skating Center. The Pentagon Memorial was dedicated in 2008 and has received over 200,000 visitors annually since.

SUMMARY

Arlington’s disaster response is one that was truly learned “on the job.” Communities can respond to disasters by dealing with human needs first, collaborating with regional partners, and adopting innovative and agile marketing strategies. Arlington’s tourism industry today has
made a full recovery, and the city continues to capture top rankings for its economy and quality of life.