

Long Beach Convention Center Overhauls Neighboring Arena Into Large and Versatile Ballroom

By Hil Anderson, senior editor

Long Beach, CA – The Long Beach Convention Center has added a new option for trade show organizers by renovating a venerable arena into a state-of-the-art ballroom complex large enough to host huge receptions for more than 5,000 people with room to spare.

The Pacific Ballroom was formerly the Long Beach Arena, and years ago it hosted significant events including packed-house performances by the Rolling Stones, Frank Sinatra, and the Doors. The building, managed by SMG, enters 2014 as an inviting special-event venue for banquets and receptions connected to conventions and trade shows taking place next door at the convention center.

The new capabilities the Pacific Ballroom were put on display in November at a grand-opening party attended by about 800 people. The large turnout included Mayor Bob Foster, who said, "With its high-tech innovations, the Pacific Ballroom is the perfect canvas for any event planner."

"TED, the most innovative conference in the world, was in Long Beach for five years, which allowed us to observe how they creatively used our meeting spaces," said Steve Goodling, president & CEO of the Long Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau. "With the renovation, we have reimagined the Long Beach Arena, creating a flexible space that will allow other groups to have a similar experience without high cost."

The ballroom is a stand-alone structure with an exterior wall decorated by famed marine-life painter Wyland. It has three major spaces:

- The entryway is the Pacific Gallery, which measures 19,000 square feet (sf) and can accommodate a sit-down banquet for 800 people or 1,400 guests mingling at a cocktail reception. The entry was large enough to hold several badge pick-up tables, a valet parking operation and still accommodate a temporary skateboard ramp where members of a Long Beach youth skateboard club entertained arriving party guests with their daring stunts.
- A separate 6,425 sf bar area called Bogart & Co. can also host dinners or VIP receptions behind closed doors.
- The ballroom itself is extremely spacious -- it hosted the Rolling Stones, after all -- and more flexible than many such rooms with 46,000 sf of total floor space -- plus it features programmable lighting and sound systems.

The Wow Factor

The star of the show was virtually hidden from view from the guests. A large "flying" truss grid in the ceiling allows planners to raise and lower the ceiling. The main area of the ballroom can also be walled off into smaller spaces. At the grand opening, guests were happily grazing at food stations in a 23,000-sf space when one wall suddenly rolled away to reveal an area equally as large -- and equipped with a main stage for the band that provided the evening's marquee entertainment.

The Pacific Ballroom is not included in the rental of the convention center, however, the fee comparatively modest and can be waived if an appropriate catering order is placed for an event.

The Long Beach Convention & Visitors Bureau reported the booking of seven groups with signed contracts, representing an Estimated Economic Impact (EEI) of \$29 million, which includes \$494,000 in direct Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT) to the City of Long Beach. In addition, the bureau has tentatives from 16 groups interested in booking the Pacific Ballroom for a potential EEI of \$33 million and estimated TOT of \$2 million.

Long Beach is in the middle of a fiercely competitive market that includes large convention centers in downtown Los Angeles, Anaheim, and down the coast in San Diego. The addition of the Pacific Ballroom to the convention center package provides the city with an interesting alternative to show organizers looking for a dedicated party space for a large crowd.

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