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Business conferences

CHOGM and LNG 18 give Perth a chance to prove its credentials.
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LNG 18

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Conventions gold for Perth

Western Australia has an opportunity to prove itself as a global convention destination. Emily Morgan reports.

Business conventions may be the ticket out of the office for some or offer logistical thrills for lovers of extreme organising but, on a grander scale, business tourism can mean big dollars for a place like Perth.

The Perth Convention Bureau estimates conventions will contribute \$102 million to Western Australia in the current financial year thanks to, among others, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) with its 3,000 politically minded delegates and their wallets, or expense accounts, arriving in Perth in October.

The world's largest liquefied natural gas convention, LNG 18, follows in 2016 and, with 5,000 delegates set to hit WA's shores, both conventions are set to offer Perth a place on the world stage and could boost the city's status as a convention destination.

In 2009 Perth ranked 148 on the International Congress and Convention Association's global city ranking, having hosted 12 international conventions, behind first-placed Vienna with 160, Sydney at 27 with 61 and Melbourne, ranked 54 with 30.

Perth's potential is widely recognised but the question is, can the state harness its 15 minutes of fame to secure long-term attention in the international convention market?

The answer is yes, according to Tourism WA chairman Kate Lamont, who said the winning bid for LNG 18 was proof of Perth's emergence as a global city. "This decision is a vote of confidence in Perth," Ms Lamont says.

Perth Convention Bureau (PCB) chief executive Paul Beeson appears more confident than his predecessor Christine McLean about Perth's ability to build the infrastructure needed to host bigger conventions, saying the opportunities that flow from conventions extend beyond economics.

"There will be enormous marketing opportunities for us as a destination and CHOGM is a great one to show the capacity and quality of Perth as a destination," Mr Beeson says.

PCB, which promotes Perth as a convention destination under a charter from the state government, secured the LNG 18 conference and Mr Beeson said the bureau has been working with metropolitan and regional hospitality operators to promote tourism to 'book-end' the conference.

"We can promote Perth as the gateway city for the conference and pre and post-touring," he says.

PCB is also looking at the evolving Chinese market, with direct flights from China to Perth due soon. But, given that PCB is working with members' funds, Mr Beeson says the bureau will tread tentatively.

Tourism Council WA chief executive Evan Hall says Asia offers good business tourism prospects, given the proximity, similar time zones and the growth of Asian markets.

Mr Hall says working to bring trade shows to Perth also has

ancillary benefits in workforce and skills development.

"When you host the Olympics, you are likely to get more gold medals, when you bring the trade events here you get more trade sales," he says. "It works if it is closely aligned with what government is trying to do."

Mr Beeson says the development of industries, such as in the medical field, has helped Perth's development as an attractive convention destination.

"As Perth is growing, the stock of local hosts and potential conveners is growing as well," he says.

"That, simultaneously with the infrastructure improvements in Perth and the renaissance of the Perth city, is beautifully timed. In the next three years we are going to see an improvement in our product." (See page 13).

Previous PCB chair and founder of event management company EECW, Debbie-Ann Scott, says the value of business events is often underestimated.

"I don't think people understand the value of business events in the state. They just look at it as an isolated thing," she says.

"Let's say you get a lot of international people from a particular medical group that come into Perth, you are opening up this state as an opportunity for people to seek employment here in the future as well."

Four years ago, PCB adopted a strategy that focused on working with local association hosts, members and conveners within academic, medical and professional sectors to bid for events.

Mr Beeson says this has led to an 82 per cent success rate in securing business events for WA.

And, with one of the highest return on investment rates of bureaus in the country at \$30 for every dollar spent, PCB is ramping up its role.

"In the last four years our key performance indicators to government have almost quadrupled and our performance has tracked along with that," he says.

Mr Hall says forward planning is critical for the future of WA's business tourism.

"Overall, part of the job that Tourism WA, the government and Perth Convention Bureau must be working on is to try and maintain a relatively steady calendar of events, including business events," he says.

"Politicians get excited about announcing the Olympics or this, that and the other event, but trying to get the economic value from one-off events or events that have a huge surge is actually very difficult compared to a steady flow of events you can accommodate."

PCB has secured many events and has a developing order book for the coming decade, including three conventions that will bring 4,000 delegates to Perth in the next month. In 2012 Perth will



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host the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) Annual Scientific Meeting with 2,000 delegates, and the World Association for the Advancement of Veterinary Parasitology Conference with 1,325 delegates in 2013.



BIG WINDOW: Perth Convention Bureau chief executive Paul Beeson is positive about the opportunities presented to Western Australia by events such as CHOGM and LNG 18. **Photo: Grant Currall**