



Convention center in fest biz

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With a big empty field and a spotty summer business schedule, the New Orleans convention center is making its first foray into the festival business with the Tailgate and BBQ Festival.

"There are periods of time, much to our dismay, where we have a paucity of events in the city, primarily because of the hurricane season," said Bob Johnson, general manager of the 1.1-million-square-foot Ernest N. Morial Convention Center.

The center had contracts to build a 500,000-square-foot expansion on 26 acres along the riverfront, but Hurricane Katrina and later the recession intervened.

So the convention center, a local event planning company called New Orleans Convention Co. and marketing company Enthused Media of Tampa, Fla., joined for the Tailgate and BBQ Festival, which runs Friday through Sunday.

It's a smart, creative move at a time when some associations have canceled conventions for a year or even two, said Eric Blanc, first vice president of the **Association for Convention Operations Management**.

"You're going to see nontraditional events going on at convention centers, especially because the convention business is down right now. ... So convention centers are forced to find other ways to finance themselves," he said.

Steve Schmader, CEO of the International Festival & Events Association based in Boise, Idaho, said, "It sounds like they've got an ideal spot. There'd be a lot of events around the country that'd love to have 26 acres of prime acreage to have an event in."

It's not all ready for festivals yet, Johnson said. He estimated the Tailgate and BBQ Festival and a Labor Day weekend music festival not organized by the convention center will use about 14 acres.

Although U.S. stadiums and convention centers typically haven't run their own festivals, Schmader said, one in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, does so frequently.

"Temperatures are so high they tend to do everything indoors, so they have shopping festivals. A lot of shopping malls are built around the idea of hosting events in them," Schmader said.

But, he said, a couple of big stadiums have asked him recently whether it might make sense to put on festivals or rent their space out for festivals.

"I think whenever you have the kind of economic marketplace we're in, it tends to drive some entrepreneurial thought," Schmader said.

Though the events are much different, the reasons for the tailgate festival are very much those that got the Essence Music Festival started 15 years ago.

"Many, many years ago, when I was at the Superdome, we had the first discussions with (music promoter) Quint Davis -- 'What can we do over the Fourth of July weekend?' It was a time when things were excruciatingly slow," Johnson said. "We did something that made the Fourth of July weekend one of the biggest on the calendar."

Despite the recession, this year's Essence Festival drew a record crowd -- more than 428,000.

For the new festival, the convention center and its partners went with football, Louisiana's great fall passion. "So there's a whole untapped market out there surrounding the phenomenon of tailgating," Johnson said.

A "fan fest," with displays from the NFL, Sugar Bowl, Tulane University and the Army, and from companies that sell sportswear, grills, and other tailgating equipment, is in the hall nearest to the field.

One hall over, a local company is displaying 35 recreational vehicles.

It's already bigger than planners expected -- they'd figured on using only one of the center's 10 halls, said festival spokesman Frank Stansbury.

Each day of the festival has a different football focus. Friday night -- a benefit for the Louisiana High School Athletic Association -- includes a showcase of three of the area's top high-school bands, a question-and-answer session with 2008 state championship coaches, a ceremonial barbecue-pit lighting by the Army and a barbecue-eating contest.

"Saturday and Sunday, there's university and collegiate football, with pro football on Sunday," Johnson said.

Outside there are daylong concerts and food vendors.

Two cooking contests -- a \$15,000 competition on the official Kansas City Barbecue Society circuit and a tailgate seafood-cooking contest -- are scheduled Saturday. Sunday has the tailgate rig competition, with points for decor, ease of setup and other matters as well as food. Judges include Joe Cahn, former owner of the New Orleans Cooking School and now self-appointed Commissioner of Tailgating.

"If you're competitive and you have a rig, you can get into the festival free," Stansbury said.