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## Atlanta Convention Center Sees Resurgence in Event Bookings

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Nov. 26--The recession that almost choked the life out of the meetings industry two years ago is starting to loosen its grip.

As of Oct. 31, more than half of the exhibit space at downtown Atlanta's Georgia World Congress Center -- the fourth-largest convention center in the country -- had been booked for next fiscal year, said Patsie Rand, GWCC director of sales and marketing. The bookings represent a near 6 percent increase over fiscal 2004.

Increasing bookings are critical for GWCC because the center doubled its exhibit space in 2002 to remain competitive in a market of ever-bigger convention centers. Unfortunately, the additional space opened just when convention bookings nose-dived because of the economic recession.

Before opening the expansion, GWCC exhibit space was occupied 65 percent to 70 percent of the time. That number dropped below 50 percent after the new space was added. Some of the drop was expected because of the additional space, Rand said. The rest was caused by the lag in bookings.

But there are signs the convention industry and GWCC may have turned the corner.

At the end of October, about 55 percent of GWCC exhibit space was booked for fiscal 2005, which began in July.

The conventions coming are both big and small. The most stable industries now are home building, construction, manufacturing and distribution. But one of the biggest conventions booked is for businesses built around fun.

The International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions is scheduled to come to Atlanta for its annual convention. The gathering, which rotates among Atlanta, Chicago and Orlando, attracts about 35,000 and will use two-thirds of the World Congress Center. IAAPA was last in Atlanta in 2001.

For IAAPA, Atlanta's convention center is attractive because it is so big. The amusement industry show displays go well beyond booths. They're even bigger than the saunas or boats featured at other trade shows. Last week's IAAPA convention in Orlando included a three-tiered carousel and a full-size, working tilt-a-whirl ride.

"We've got 10 miles of aisles," said IAAPA spokeswoman Beth Robertson.

The group will use about 1.1 million square feet of exhibit space in Atlanta, expanding beyond GWCC to take up 105,000 square feet at the Georgia Dome.

Rick Kirkland, general manager of Evento Company Ltd. of Napier, New Zealand, is looking forward to the return to Atlanta. He has fond memories of the city as the place where he successfully launched Go Racer, a toy racing vehicle made in the shape of a commode. His latest invention -- displayed in Orlando -- is a racer in the shape of a bathtub.

While Orlando is the family amusement capital of the country, he thinks Atlanta is a better business and media town.