



## Midwest

# Magnified

Northern Ohio is sharpening its focus on innovative new meetings-friendly offerings



**N**ORTHERN OHIO IS A unique Midwestern region encompassing locales equipped for large-scale conventions, intimate retreats and everything in between.

Cleveland is fast-becoming a special niche market for medical meetings, and associations, corporate groups and regional gatherings have all found Akron, Toledo and other group-friendly destinations in the region to be easily accessible and full of the appropriate amenities for successful events.

### CLEVELAND

Cleveland is significantly expanding infrastructure and boosting efforts to ramp up meetings business.

According to Dan Williams, vice president of sales at Positively Cleveland CVB, the city is already filled with tier-one amenities at reasonable costs and currently has more than \$2 billion of tourism-related development being added to the mix.

Among the major projects are the new Cleveland Medical Mart and Convention Center, new and renovated hotels, and expansions to some existing centers.

"The Medical Mart is the first of its kind, so we expect medical meetings to grow,"

Williams says, adding that the enhancements of the International Exposition Center, featuring more than 1 million square feet of exhibit space, means Cleveland can accommodate larger groups of all types. "Even though the meetings industry is recovering at a slow pace, the interest in Cleveland has skyrocketed."

Meetings-friendly hotels include the new InterContinental Suites Cleveland and InterContinental Cleveland, which is attached to the Cleveland Clinic Foundation via walkway and less than one mile from the University Circle cultural and arts district; the Cleveland Marriott Downtown at Key Center and the Renaissance Cleveland Hotel.

Cleveland is also home to several unique districts that groups might like to explore during downtime, including University Circle, PlayhouseSquare Theater District and East Fourth Street Entertainment District.

"The one-and-only Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum and the world-renowned Cleveland Museum of Art offer groups a unique and distinctly Cleveland meeting venue," Williams adds, citing two of the city's more popular attractions that double as off-site gathering spots for groups.

### AKRON

Greater Akron's central location, easy access via interstates and two major airports, affordable accommodations and meeting venues, and attractions including Ohio's only national park, makes the destination well worth considering for events of all sizes and budgets, according to Mary Tri-caso, director of sales at the Akron/Summit CVB.

Gregg Mervis, vice president and COO of the



# Meetings Focus East

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Akron/Summit CVB and John S. Knight Convention Center, adds that with the continuing expansion and success of Akron's biomedical corridor, the city is aggressively promoting amenities and venues like the convention center that make hosting these and similar events particularly attractive to meeting planners.

Two years ago, the CVB was also asked to manage Greystone Hall, the circa-1917 former Masonic Temple featuring a two-story grand ballroom, theater and additional meeting rooms directly across the street from the convention center.

"This allows us to market and book the spaces in tandem," Mervis says.

Greater Akron has more than 60 hotels, including 12 full-service properties with flexible meeting space. Major flags include Sheraton, Hilton, Ramada, Holiday Inn, Marriott, Clarion, Cambria Suites and Radisson.

Among area off-site venues that are popular with groups are Stan Hywet Hall and Gardens, the 65-room Tudor-style mansion of Goodyear cofounder F.A. Seiberling; the Akron Zoo; the recently expanded Akron Art Museum; the Akron Civic Theatre; and Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad, which

has several premium hospitality cars that accommodate dining, entertainment and socializing for smaller groups interested in traveling through the heart of Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

## CANTON

Canton/Stark County is another affordable Northern Ohio option with easy access to the Akron Canton Airport just five minutes away.

What sets the area apart, says Mary Vlahos, convention sales manager at the Canton Stark County CVB, is its many attractions, including three that are nationally recognized: the Pro Football Hall of Fame, which is undergoing a multimillion-dollar renovation, the National First Ladies' Library and the William McKinley Presidential Library and Museum.

The Pro Football Hall of Fame and McKinley Museum both accommodate off-site events, as do Gervasi Vineyard, which also facilitates custom cooking and wine-tasting classes for groups, and the Wilderness Center in Wilmot.

"We have many unique venues that take you away from the ordinary," Vlahos says,



citing The Fieldcrest, which belonged to the Hoover (vacuum cleaner) family and resembles their favorite log cabin resort in Colorado. "The Arts District is exploding in downtown Canton, with many unique galleries and anchored by the Cultural Center for the Arts, another place to have a meeting or event."

Some of the larger area meetings venues are University Center at Kent State University-Stark, an IACC-certified conference center, the Krassas Event Center and the Canton Memorial Civic Center.

Properties include the McKinley Grand

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## CLEVELAND

- ▶ **Cleveland Medical Mart and Convention Center** (216.920.1430; [www.clevelandmedicalmart.com](http://www.clevelandmedicalmart.com)) is on track to open downtown in 2013. The Medical Mart will be the world's only facility targeted to the medical and health care industries, and the adjoining convention center will boast 230,000 square feet of exhibit hall space. The \$465 million venue will also feature 60,000 square feet of meeting rooms and a 30,000-square-foot grand ballroom with views of Lake Erie.
- ▶ The Crowne Plaza Cleveland City Centre closed in November 2011 and is rescheduled to reopen as the **Westin Cleveland Convention Center Hotel** (800.937.8461; [www.starwoodhotels.com](http://www.starwoodhotels.com)) in July 2013 after a \$64 million renovation that includes guest room upgrades. The property will have more than 25,000 square feet of meeting space, a restaurant with outdoor dining space, a business center, a fitness center and a spa.
- ▶ By spring 2013, the new Starwood **Aloft** (877.462.5638; [www.starwoodhotels.com](http://www.starwoodhotels.com)) boutique hotel downtown will anchor a \$275 million development project connecting the East Bank of the Flats with the Warehouse District. The **Flats East Bank** (216.514.8700; [www.flatseast.com](http://www.flatseast.com)) waterfront district will feature retail and entertainment options, a 1,200-foot boardwalk, a riverfront beach and 10 acres of public parks.
- ▶ The \$350 million **Cleveland Horseshoe Casino** ([www.horseshoe.com/info/cleveland](http://www.horseshoe.com/info/cleveland)) is scheduled to complete its first phase, located in the historic Higbee Building on Public Square, in June, and the second phase of the casino is slated for completion in 2013 on the banks of the Cuyahoga River.
- ▶ The International Exposition Center, or **I-X Center** (216.676.6000; [www.ixcenter.com](http://www.ixcenter.com)), announced plans in 2011 to invest \$25 million to \$30 million over the next few years to upgrade visitor amenities, and improve traffic flow and parking.
- ▶ The 70,000-square-foot **Greater Cleveland Aquarium** (216.862.8803; [www.greaterclevelandaquarium.com](http://www.greaterclevelandaquarium.com)) celebrated its grand opening in January. The aquarium has spaces to rent for gatherings, and the entire aquarium is available for buyouts.
- ▶ **Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art** (216.421.8671; [www.mocacleveland.org](http://www.mocacleveland.org)) broke ground on a new 34,000-square-foot, four-story home that is scheduled to open in fall 2012.
- ▶ The **Cleveland Museum of Art** (216.421.7350; [www.clevelandart.org](http://www.clevelandart.org)) continues its progress on a massive makeover due for completion in 2013. More than 900 pieces are back on display in 16,000 square feet of renovated space. Yet to come is the completion of two more wings, the build-out of neighboring restaurants and shopping spaces, and the opening of a hands-on interactive Lifelong Learning Center in the fall of 2012.

## CANTON

- ▶ The **Pro Football Hall of Fame** (330.456.8207; [www.profootballhof.com/future50](http://www.profootballhof.com/future50)) is undergoing a multimillion-dollar "Future 50" expansion and renovation to better preserve and present its ever-growing collection of artifacts and documents by expanding from 83,000 square feet to 115,000 square feet. Completion is expected in 2013 to coincide with the Hall of Fame's 50th anniversary.
- ▶ Gervasi Vineyard added an event center, the **Villa Grande Conference and Event Facility** (330.497.1000; [www.gervasivineyard.com](http://www.gervasivineyard.com)), in November.

## LAKE ERIE & THE SHORES

- ▶ The **Kalahari Convention Center** opened at Sandusky, Ohio-based Kalahari Resort (419.433.7759; [www.kalahariresorts.com](http://www.kalahariresorts.com)) in January after a \$22 million expansion that more than doubled the size of the resort's meeting facilities to 215,000 square feet. The 120,000-square-foot addition features a 38,000-square-foot ballroom/expo center, a 12,000-square-foot junior ballroom, 14 new

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## Happenings

meeting rooms, 30,000 square feet of prefunction space and audiovisual capabilities. Also at Kalahari Resort, the **Nyumba Entertainment Villas** opened in late 2011. These two-level standalone buildings have five bedrooms, four bathrooms, a living room, a recreation room and a six-person hot tub.

- **The Tri-Motor Heritage Museum** (419.366.0950; [www.trimotorheritagefoundation.org](http://www.trimotorheritagefoundation.org)) is set to open during this summer at the Erie-Ottawa Regional Airport in Port Clinton. The museum is dedicated to the history of Ford Tri-Motor aircraft and will house historic displays, a fully restored vintage 1950s diner and the ongoing restoration of Ford Tri-Motor 5-AT-40, which will offer sightseeing flights over the Lake Erie islands region.

### TOLEDO

- **The Toledo Hollywood Casino** (419.661.5200; [www.hollywoodcasinotoledo.com](http://www.hollywoodcasinotoledo.com)) is currently under construction and is set to open in spring with a 125,000-square-foot gaming floor featuring up to 2,000 of the newest slot machines, 60 table games and four restaurants.

Hotel in downtown Canton, a historic area surrounded by quaint restaurants, art galleries and museums, Vlahos says, and in the Belden Village area, a shopping and entertainment district, there are Holiday Inn and Courtyard by Marriott hotels.

While the area welcomes a wide variety of larger association and corporate meetings, board retreats are well suited for the Bertram Inn at Glenmoor Country Club.

### LAKE ERIE & THE SHORES

All the necessary bells and whistles for a successful event, including affordability, are available in the Lake Erie Shores and Islands area, according to Amanda Smith Rasnick, group sales coordinator at Lake Erie Shores & Islands Welcome Center.

“Our location is prime—on the Ohio turnpike just one hour from Toledo and Cleveland,” she says. “Being located right on the lake provides activities that you can’t get in most other places around the state, such as cruises to the islands, water sports and



Cleveland  
Orchestra

fishing.”

Outdoor pursuits are a good idea along the shore, where groups always enjoy taking a ferry to one of the islands in Lake Erie as well as outings to Cedar Point Amusement Park, which touts itself as the roller coaster capital of the world.

“[Groups can] experience an adventure that they won’t get anywhere else in Ohio,” Smith Rasnick says, pointing to an array of options, including relaxing at an island winery, strolling the shops, exploring a cave or kayaking.

Kalahari Resort, she adds, is a prime example of how the area is evolving as a regional meetings hot spot.

“Three years ago they expanded the number of guest rooms to now have the title of largest hotel in the state of Ohio, and just this year they expanded the conference space,” she says.

Other meetings players in the area include Sawmill Creek Resort, Great Wolf Lodge and

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Put-in-Bay Resort Hotel and Conference Center.

"We are always exploring new ways to attract business," Smith Rasnick says. "Our website is newly designed to offer everything a planner needs right at the click of a button. We are also exploring other markets such as the pharmaceutical market."

## TOLEDO

While Toledo has always been an active corporate group market, it's grown in recent years to include association meetings and trade shows, according to Rich Nachazel, president at Destination Toledo CVB.

"Toledo can offer the same convention amenities as a larger city, but we have a site that is easier to get around in, costs much less and generates positive comments from meeting attendees," he says. "All of this in a community with a beautiful downtown riverfront and easy access to Lake Erie."

Additionally noteworthy is the recent merging of the Medical College of Ohio and the University of Toledo, where Nachazel says affordability and accessibility to world-class meeting and medical facilities combine to welcome group business.

Attractions groups enjoy when meeting in Toledo will soon include the new Hollywood Casino, as well as standbys like the Toledo Museum of Art and the Toledo Zoo, which are both available for off-site events.

For the business portion of the meeting, a group-friendly portfolio includes the SeaGate Convention Centre, Huntington Center Arena and hotels such as Park Inn by Radisson, Maumee Bay Lodge and Conference Center and Hilton Toledo.

## BOWLING GREEN

Bowling Green offers small-town hospitality with big-city amenities, according to Wendy Stram, executive director at the Bowling Green CVB.

"Bowling Green is famous for having the first and only wind farm in the state of Ohio and now houses the new Stroh Center basketball arena and the Wolfe Center for the Arts on the campus of Bowling Green State University," she says, adding that BGSU is also home to the Bowen-Thompson Student Union and Olscamp Hall, both available for group events.

While groups could call properties such as Best Western, Holiday Inn Express, Hampton Inn or Victory Inn & Suites home base, attendees will enjoy off-site gatherings at Snook's Dream Cars Automobile Museum, Stone Ridge Golf Club and Clazel Theatre, among others. **MFE**

*Carolyn Blackburn is a frequent contributor to MEETINGS FOCUS EAST.*

Search for detailed information about CVBs, hotels and meeting facilities in Northern Ohio by visiting our website at [MeetingsFocus.com/Ohio](http://MeetingsFocus.com/Ohio).

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