

## AQUARIUM PUMPS UP BOTTOM LINES FOR HOTELS

By LEON STAFFORD

Last year, when managers of the Omni Hotel at CNN drew up their budget for 2006, they figured they would sell 300 to 400 room packages to people wanting to visit the Georgia Aquarium.

They miscalculated.

As of October, more than 2,000 individuals and families plunked down between \$240 and \$290 for an Omni deal that includes tickets to the fish tank, an overnight stay at the hotel, breakfast and assorted aquarium-related goodies.

It's a story that hotels and others in Atlanta hospitality tell as they look at the impact the Georgia Aquarium has had on their bottom lines in 2006.

Aquarium operators expect to have welcomed 3.6 million visitors by the time its one-year anniversary rolls around Friday. The aquarium has not only helped in the quest to establish Atlanta as a tourism destination, it has become an economic boon for the city.

"No one anticipated the level of success that the aquarium has brought to downtown," said Lauren Jarrell, spokeswoman for the Atlanta Convention & Visitors Bureau, which is responsible for selling the city to conventioners and tourists. "It brought more visitors downtown, filled our hotel rooms and gave investors a reason to believe that the climate is ripe to move their investment into the market."

Omni spokesman Mike Sullivan said the hotel has been surprised by the number of aquarium packages it has sold.

"We thought we would see a lot of activity in the summertime when schools were out, but we sold close to 200 packages a month year-round."

Since the aquarium opened, hotels rooms in the city have had a much more steady flow of traffic than the up-and-down swing of convention traffic, hotel and tourism officials said. Downtown restaurants are seating diners who had rarely or never ventured to the area, and conventioners are flooding the aquarium's ballrooms for opening-day receptions.



Patrons look at the beluga whale exhibit. About 3.6 million people will have visited the aquarium during its first year, which ends Friday.

"Atlanta has always been a successful convention town, but conventions have definitive dates," Jarrell said. "The number of visitors that have stayed downtown to experience our attractions has really helped fill hotel rooms that are traditionally not occupied between conventions. It's given downtown consistent occupancy."

The tank's success also is helping to fast-track \$2.5 billion in new investment downtown, which includes hotels, residential units and retail, said A.J. Robinson, president of the downtown business group Central Atlanta Progress. At a meeting last week, Robinson gave the building industry an overview of downtown and where it's going.

Atlanta, which has always enjoyed strong convention demand, now has a tourism destination to match.

"Our whole community is awash in a new attitude and optimism," he said, giving the credit to the aquarium.

Definitive numbers on the aquarium's economic impact are hard to come by, and most of the information is anecdotal. One study, which is being conducted by the aquarium, projects the facility will spur \$1.3 billion to \$1.5 billion in economic activity during its first five years, aquarium executive director Jeff Swanagan said.

That is nearly a half-billion more than Swanagan predicted in a September 2005 column in The Atlanta-Journal Constitution, just months before the attraction's opening.

"Downtown is not just a business address anymore," he said.

Business has been so good at the aquarium that it may have contributed to a budgeting shortfall at the Georgia World Congress Center.

At the October meeting of the center's board, GWCC Executive Director Dan Graveline said that catering — the money the facility makes feeding the thousands that come through the country's fourth-largest convention center — was roughly \$860,000 under projections.

"In hindsight, that might have been because of our friends at the Georgia Aquarium," Graveline said.

The aquarium proved a big draw for members of the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions, in town last week for its annual convention at the GWCC.

The group, which held its 2005 meeting in Atlanta just days before the aquarium formally opened, doubled attendance at its education session this year because it was held at the fish tank, said IAAPA spokesman David Mandt.

A tour set up for members to go behind-the-scenes of the aquarium quickly sold out and had a waiting list, he said.

"It's just an unparalleled experience," Mandt said.

Mark Vaughan, executive vice president for sales and marketing at the ACVB, said the aquarium should help the organization bring millions of dollars into the city for years to come because few aquariums in other cities include meeting space.

"From a meetings and convention standpoint, it will always be a player," he said.

Downtown hotels are not the only beneficiaries. The Ritz-Carlton Buckhead, in partnership with its sister hotel, Ritz-Carlton Atlanta, sold a combined 1,500 room packages and 3,200 tickets. The Marriott Marquis, the city's largest hotel, sold 2,000 Georgia Aquarium room



No, the aquarium isn't just all fish. Tom Hijne of the Netherlands, visiting the aquarium with his cousins, takes a look at the African penguin exhibit. The aquarium now projects it will spur up to \$1.5 billion in economic activity during its first five years.

Because the aquarium packages were so successful for the Omni in 2006, the corporate honchos of the Texas-based chain have given the Atlanta hotel the green light to spend more in advertising next year to draw additional visitors, Sullivan said.

"Our projection is that it will continue to grow and we will sell more packages in '07," he said. "I think a 7 to 10 percent increase is reasonable."