

LARGE MEETINGS IN HAWAII

A key part of tourism

The return of conferences is critical to the island's tourism recovery, an industry official says

By Allison Schaefer
 aschaefer@staradvertiser.com

Takeo Swallow, a Kalani High School student, learned about the power of magnets this week at the Hawai'i Convention Center when he took a ride on the IEEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers) superconductivity levitator, which taps the same technology that makes Japan's bullet trains possible.

"It was kind of weird. Without friction, when you are turning, it feels like you are turning the opposite way," Swallow said, adding that his ride, which was part of community outreach at the Applied Superconductivity Conference 2022, provided him with a fun way to see some of the science concepts he's studying come to life.

The weeklong conference, which wrapped up Friday, also helped enliven the convention center. Its operators have been working to recover meetings, conventions, incentives and various other events following the lifting of pandemic-related restrictions. It was only this spring that Honolulu Hale lifted some of its COVID-19 mandates, including requiring attendees at certain large gatherings to wear masks and provide proof of vaccination status or negative COVID-19 test results.

Some 1,300 people attended the ASC conference, about 500 fewer than previously expected due to the sluggish return of international travelers, mostly from Asia, said John Reyes, Meet Hawaii's senior vice president and chief MCI sales officer.

International travelers and business travelers are important to Hawaii's overall tourism performance because they typically generate higher visitor spending than leisure



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travel, Reyes said. He added that business travelers also bolster the industry by creating a base for future business that helps accelerate recovery. The tourism industry here has been pinched by the drop in both traveler types.

Reyes said ASC is the sixth of seven large citywide meetings slated for this year. That count marks an improvement over the past two years, when the center was mostly being used as overflow

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2022 CITYWIDE EVENTS

- >> **January:** International Dairy Queen
- >> **March:** Association for Asian Studies
- >> **May:** Materials Research Society Spring Meeting
- >> **June:** Pacific Rim Championship
- >> **July:** Goldschmidt Conference
- >> **October:** Applied Superconductivity
- >> **November:** American Medical Association House of Delegates

Source: Meet Hawaii

At top, Waipahu High School students watched a puff of fog escape Matthew Jewell's mouth as he ate a snack that was dropped into liquid nitrogen at the Applied Superconductivity Educational Foundation outreach event Friday at the Hawai'i Convention Center. Above, attendees of the Applied Superconductivity Conference 2022 mingled Thursday at the convention center.

MEETINGS

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space for state government as Hawaii grappled with the pandemic's public health-focused challenges.

This year's progress, combined with forward bookings, puts Hawaii on track with national projections to see its business-group lineup further recover in 2024, Reyes said.

STILL, GIVEN that big groups book travel years out, the pandemic has caused more than a two-year disruption. Meet Hawaii expects a gradual five-year ramp-up to reach a 27-event annual target, which was the average of Hawaii's two best years for business, 2015 and 2018. For 2023 the target is 12 events. After that the target bumps up to 16 in 2024, 20 in 2025, 24 in 2026 and, finally, 27 in 2027.

Reyes said conferences and other large-scale meetings are key to Hawaii's tourism recovery as they create a base of business that increases the demand curve. "When a meeting fills up a hotel, it creates compression, which allows other hotels to have opportunities," he said.

Group-business events also create growth opportunities during the fall and spring seasons, when vacation travel tapers. ASC generated more than \$8.6 million in direct economic impact for Hawaii and may have filled up to 800 rooms a night, Reyes said, pointing out that the event returned even more to Hawaii when viewed through the lens of regenerative tourism — a model that prizes broader community benefits.

"When we book a conference, we really look at the benefits to our community and residents," Reyes said, adding that scientific meetings are a good fit as they align with Hawaii's resilience goals and create opportunities for local students to further their STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education. "Our message has gotten out about malama (take care of) Hawaii," Reyes said. "When



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Matthew Jewell spilled liquid nitrogen on the floor as students from Kapolei High looked on Friday at the Applied Superconductivity Educational Foundation outreach event at the Hawai'i Convention Center. Jewell is a professor at the University of Wisconsin.

we talk to citywide customers, they want to know what they can do to give back."

Kathleen Amm, ASC treasurer and past president, said both Hawaii and ASC embrace "green energy for the future" and "fighting global warming" as ongoing pursuits.

"Coming to a place like Hawaii that is so beautiful and cares about nature and cares about green energy resonates and aligns with us," Amm said. "We love to teach everyone about these things."

Additionally, Amm said, in the interest of supporting STEM education, the conference's organizers were able to obtain extra sponsorship from the IEEE Council on Superconductivity for the Hawaii outreach effort. "They wanted to make sure that we were doing a phenomenal job while we are here in Hawaii — it's a little bit isolated, and we really

want to help the community," with a special emphasis showcasing STEM fields.

Members of the conference's outreach team arrived early to bring superconductivity demonstrations to schools, including Mililani High, Kapolei High, Aiea High, Waiialua High, Pearl City High, Ke'elikolani Middle School, Kalani High as well as Punahou, La Pieta and 'Iolani schools. They also conducted an outreach event at the University of Hawaii at Manoa campus. And at the convention center, hundreds of public school students attended an Applied Superconductivity Educational Foundation outreach event held Friday afternoon.

The conference turnout and community reach bode well for the continued return of large events to Hawaii, Reyes said. In September some 24,481 visitors arrived

in Hawaii for meetings, incentives and conventions — a 153% increase over 2021.

"We are cautiously optimistic," Reyes said. "We've seen the growth, but I think we've seen through the last couple of years that things can change quickly."

WHILE SOME tourism industry observers are "looking at 2024 to be that year where it comes back," he said, there's also concern about "COVID and any new variant, but more importantly ... recession and how deep is it really going to be."

For now those headwinds are in the horizon for Hawaii's tourism in general. According to the latest preliminary visitor statistics released Thursday by the state Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism, total visitor arrivals to Hawaii in September were within 5% of pre-pandemic

times, mostly due to domestic visitors as arrivals from international destinations, especially Japan, were still down.

Some 703,270 visitors came to Hawaii in September, representing a 95.5% recovery from September 2019.

Visitor spending in September rose to more than \$1.8 billion, a nominal increase of 18.5% over September 2019.

Total arrivals from the U.S. West in September rose to 395,115 — a 29.2% gain from September 2019. Arrivals from the U.S. East increased 28.4% from September of 2019 to 170,995 visitors.

International visitor arrivals to Hawaii are recovering, but were still down in September compared with September 2019. A total of 24,092 visitors from Japan came to Hawaii in September. Arrivals from Japan, which is normally Hawaii's largest source market for

international visitors, were down 83.3% from September 2019.

September's visitors stayed an average of 8.9 days, up 5.9% from their average length of stay in September 2019. On any given September day, there were 208,589 visitors — up 1.2% from the average daily statewide census in September 2019.

Results varied across the major islands. The average daily visitor census in September was up 23.9% for Hawaii island in September and was up 19% for Kauai and 7% for Maui. However, the average daily census on Oahu was down 10.5%.

More than 7.8 million visitors came to Hawaii through the first nine months of 2022, marking a 12% decrease from the same period in 2019. But total nominal visitor spending through September rose 7.9% to \$14.35 billion.