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Southeast Texas Regional Conference offered plenty of tips for members looking to make money, save money and protect their investments

By Jonathan Springston, AAHOA Lodging Conference

The Southeast Texas Region may be the smallest of its kind by geography but what it lacks in area it more than makes up for in membership. During the Southeast Texas Regional Conference September 26 in Houston, Regional Director Dipak "Danny" Patel announced that the Region had enrolled enough members during the Conference to become the largest AAHOA Region by membership.

Over the last three years, Danny Patel and a group of loyal Ambassadors have combed the Region looking for new members, convincing local hoteliers of the strong value of AAHOA. Their hard work has paid dividends and Danny Patel could not have been more proud.

"I never give up on Houston," he told the 200 attendees gathered for the evening business meeting on September 26, marking the first time AAHOA has been in Houston since the city hosted the 2013 Annual Convention & Trade Show.

AAHOA kicked off the day with educational seminars that focused heavily on helping members save money and protect their investments. Paul Darrow of PHD Financial advised attendees who may be struggling financially to take immediate and comprehensive action.

"If you need advice, get it from somebody. Don't wait until it's too late," he said. In addition to paying taxes and bills while maintaining a clean, inviting hotel, Darrow recommended a series of actions owners can take to get their financial house in order.

These include ceasing payments on SBA 504 loans in the second position, perhaps working out an Offer In Compromise with the SBA to make payments more manageable, and perhaps bifurcating the current mortgage into two parts, one the owner can pay and the other the owner can't, through the FASB 15 program.

Darrow advised attendees that while these measures can help solve a financial issue for good, he warned that the process can take months or even years to complete.

Danny Patel noted that Darrow helped his hotel in 2011, and that Darrow's company has since gone on to help other Houston hoteliers with their financial issues.

The Southeast Texas Regional Conference took place less than a week before the online exchanges were set to go live under the terms of The Affordable Care Act. As he has during other Conferences, AAHOA's Director of Government Affairs Chip Rogers was on hand to explain the ins and outs of the complex law while fielding questions.

Though Congress and the courts have spoken and President Obama continues pressing forward on his landmark legislation, Rogers noted that there have been several tweaks to the law over time, and predicted there will be more to come. Nevertheless, Rogers stressed that whatever happens, hoteliers would be wise to make sure they are following the law correctly now in order to avoid penalties later.

When AAHOA visits Washington, D.C., in late October for its Legislative Action Summit, the association will be asking Congress to support “The Forty Hours is Full Time Act of 2013,” bi-partisan legislation that would change the definition of a full-time work week from 30 hours to 40 hours. Sen. Joe Donnelly (D-Ind.), who won election in 2012 thanks in part to support from the AAHOA PAC fund, is a co-sponsor of the Senate version.

The Women In Hotel Leadership (WIHL), Independent Hoteliers and Young Professional Committees hosted a special session of their own geared toward younger members representing association demographics that are sometimes overlooked.

Rashmikant V. “Haji” Patel, chair of the Independent Hoteliers, said his committee is working on finding a property management system (PMS) solution for independents that is cost effective with 24/7 technical support as well as working with online travel agencies (OTAs) to form a better relationship with independents.

Female Director at Large, Eastern Division Jagruti Panwala, co-chair of WIHL, encouraged female members to become Ambassadors while WIHL Committee member Trusha Patel encouraged women to help spread the word about the value of AAHOA.

“My passion is the hotel industry. We [women] are often running hotels. I have to get more involved in my community,” Southeast Texas Ambassador Dina Patel said. “There are so many things I can learn.”

Southeast Texas Ambassador Tejal Patel gained inspiration to become more involved during this year's Annual Convention. “Don't wait for somebody to tell you to get involved,” she advised.

Rakhee Patel, shareholder, Pronske & Patel, gave a long talk on the best practices for protecting assets and why that's so important.

“If you understand what your assets are and how they're held, then you can do something with them when the problem comes along two years from now,” she said. “Don't wait until it's too late. Now is the time to understand your assets. If you do it now when there is no problem, there is a better chance you are completely protected.”

Later in the day, after each AAHOA Officer had updated attendees on what the association has accomplished this year on legislative priorities, industry partnerships and internal infrastructure, Scott Joslove, president and CEO of the Texas Hotel & Lodging Association (TH&LA), closed the Regional Conference with an update on local legislation.

After six months and three special sessions, Joslove said the Texas legislature had just concluded its “most important legislative session in a decade.” He noted that thanks to support from AAHOA during the annual Converge On The Capitol event in Austin earlier this year, the Texas hospitality industry managed to notch several key victories.

These victories include passing a bill that would cap at four years the maximum amount of time government can look back at a hotel's financial records for the purpose of an audit; passing a bill that capped the hotel tax at 17 percent; and passing a bill that requires Texas per diem rates to match those at the federal level.

Editor's Note: This story will appear in the October issue. For more photos from this event, please click here.

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