

# 1 today's hotelier

The Official Publication of AAHOA

# FOR Tomorrow

## Insights

from your AAHOA Officers on the state of the industry and AAHOA's role in shaping its future  
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**AAHOA 24**  
FOR Tomorrow

2023-2024

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# 5 Things to Know About AAHOA This Month

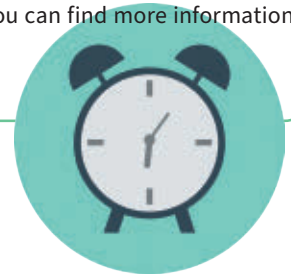
## 1 THE LARGEST GATHERING OF EXHIBITING VENDORS IN AAHOA HISTORY TAKES OVER ORLANDO

AAHOA secured more than 520 exhibitors and 90,000-plus square feet of exhibit space for the Trade Show at AAHOACON24, April 2-5, making it the largest gathering of vendors exhibiting in AAHOA history in AAHOA history. AAHOA Members and others will take Orlando by storm, taking part in numerous social events, 44 education sessions, and installation of the new Board of Directors.



## 2 AMBASSADOR AND COMMITTEE DEADLINES COMING UP SOON

The participation and talent of our dynamic membership is vital to AAHOA's success. Encourage your fellow members to apply to serve as Ambassadors or on AAHOA Committees. The deadline for committee applications is April 5 and Ambassador applications is April 10. You can find more information at [AAHOACON.com/Important-Deadline](https://AAHOACON.com/Important-Deadline).



## 3 AAHOA IS NOW ON WHATSAPP!

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## 4 KEEP TRACK OF WHAT'S GOING ON AT AAHOA

AAHOA has a full slate of events for 2024 from Regional Conferences and Trade Shows to conferences hosted by allied organizations. AAHOA Members can stay in the know about what's going on across the county by visiting the event calendar at [AAHOA.com/Calendar](https://AAHOA.com/Calendar).



## 5 TOP ARTICLES IN TODAY'S HOTELIER MAGAZINE FOR 2023

We're already four months into 2024, but let's take a moment and look back last year's most-read articles in *Today's Hotelier*. Among them was a focus on getting connected that looked at examining the benefits of implementing technology-based solutions authored by Nupen Patel. Take a moment and reconnect with his thoughts at [Tinyurl.com/4r5y83yb](https://Tinyurl.com/4r5y83yb).



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**BHARAT PATEL, CHO, CHIA**  
AAHOA CHAIRMAN (2023-2024)

# Every end is a new beginning

“What we have done for ourselves alone dies with us; what we have done for others and the world remains and is immortal.”

– Albert Pike

“Making advocacy the focal point of AAHOA’s mission and vision was my ultimate goal as Chairman, and as I reflect on all we have accomplished together, I’m proud to know I gave it my all and did all I set out to do.”

**A**T AAHOACON23, WHEN I WAS THE INCOMING CHAIRMAN, I SHARED ON THE MAIN stage of general session that I felt it was my responsibility to share certain experiences on behalf of AAHOA Members to help create positive change for the largest hotel owners association in the world.

I’ve lived the hospitality journey and walked in the shoes of nearly every person who has worked in this industry. I talked about how I’ve rented rooms, cleaned rooms, and can relate to everyone in this business.

When I got involved with AAHOA, I was looking for a sense of community, for networking, and for resources on how to run my hotel business better. Many AAHOA Members joined for the same reasons.

This marks the end of my tenure as AAHOA Chairman, and I am proud to say I believe AAHOA accomplished much more than I could have imagined. From attending the Diwali celebration at U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris’ residence in Washington, D.C., the Historic State Visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, AAHOA hosting U.S. Presidential Contender Vivek Ramaswamy for the Industry Forum, and obtaining mainstream media coverage regarding the proposed Choice Hotels/Wyndham Merger, AAHOA was in the national spotlight many times.

AAHOA Members helped prevent the City of Los Angeles from implementing a mandatory homeless voucher program, conducted tremendous advocacy work for the New Jersey Assembly Bill, held state advocacy events at capitals nationwide, held conducted hundreds of meetings with public officials, and traveled to Washington, D.C., for the biannual advocacy conferences. And, AAHOA assisted members with their most pressing local issues, ranging from proposed increases in occupancy taxes to significant minimum wage hikes to new STR legislation.

AAHOACON23 welcomed nearly 8,000 attendees to the Los Angeles Convention Center and included 30+ innovative education sessions, more than 89,000 net square feet of exhibit space, and 520+ exhibiting companies.

AAHOA Members made more than \$500,000 in Political Action Committee contributions and held several AAHOA Back-of-the-House Tours to develop relationships with influential elected officials.

Jointly with the American Association of Franchisees and Dealers, and the Coalition of Franchise Associations, AAHOA hosted a webinar, affording attendees to listen in on a discussion with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). AAHOA had the privilege of being joined by FTC Chair Lina Khan and FTC Commissioner Rebecca Kelly Slaughter.

AAHOA welcomed nearly 5,000 hoteliers to 25 Regional Conferences & Trade Shows, participated in the top industry conferences, and held five charity golf tournaments, raising nearly \$350,000 for charity, a 26% increase from 2022.

AAHOA held its Second Annual HerOwnership Conference & Retreat and launched HYPE Ownership, Helping Young Professionals Evolve, and launched the AAHOA Charitable Foundation to support disaster relief and charitable initiatives across the country.

It’s hard to believe my year as Chairman is coming to an end. Making advocacy the focal point of AAHOA’s mission and vision was my ultimate goal as Chairman, and as I reflect on all we have accomplished together, I’m proud to know I gave it my all and did all I set out to do.

As I pass the torch to Miraj S. Patel at AAHOACON24, I know he will continue to advocate for America’s hotel owners and find new ways to renew AAHOA’s Members’ sense of belonging to AAHOA. ■

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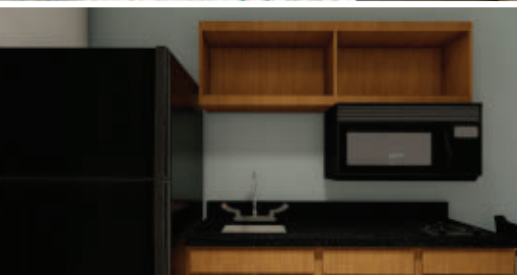
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AAHOA PRESIDENT & CEO

## Greatness awaits

“Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.”

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

“

Each year, we say AAHOACON will be bigger and better than ever, and it is hard to imagine we will ever top the year prior. But somehow, AAHOA makes it happen, and we really could not do it without the support of our members, industry partners, and more.”

**T**HIS MONTH, WE MAKE WAVES AT AAHOACON24, MY SECOND AAHOA Convention and Trade Show as President & CEO. And this year – marking the industry’s continued recovery and AAHOA’s role in that growth – the event will be the largest trade show in AAHOA history.

It is hard to believe April is already upon us, after months of planning. I commend the incredible efforts of each member of the AAHOA team, all of whom worked enthusiastically and tirelessly to ensure this is the biggest and best AAHOACON yet.

Along with AAHOA’s dedicated group of team members, I want to take the opportunity to thank our board members and volunteer leaders who help make such an amazing event happen year after year.

AAHOACON24 is one of the most highly anticipated and well-attended events in the industry, bringing together professionals and industry leaders from across hospitality. Attendees can expect a range of activities, including exceptional keynote speakers, networking opportunities, block party fun, and so much more. AAHOACON24 also provides a platform for individuals and businesses to showcase their latest innovations, connect with like-minded individuals, and stay updated on industry trends.

This year again we will feature several first-time events that you will not want to miss, including our inaugural “Collegiate Championship: Hotel Turnaround Competition” with top student teams from several of the best hospitality schools in the nation. We will be hosting a rockin’ Miami Nights-themed Welcome Reception, along with new world-class educational programs that will give you the edge in 2024.

Whether you have been to an AAHOACON before, or it is your first time, it will be highly charged with excitement as attendees are eager to explore new activities, events, opportunities, technologies, products, and services.

When people talk about AAHOACON, they often refer to the energy in the atmosphere. I always say, “there is no place like AAHOA,” and there is really no place like AAHOACON either. Usually, before it is over, people are already talking about the next one!

Each year, we say AAHOACON will be bigger and better than ever, and it is hard to imagine we will ever top the year prior. But somehow, AAHOA makes it happen, and we really could not do it without the support of our members, industry partners, and more.

I hope all AAHOACON24 attendees walk away with valuable insights, and an even greater passion for “My AAHOA” and the hospitality industry.

I am looking forward to seeing everyone in Orlando! Let’s make some waves in 2024! ■



# Reversing the addiction crisis



make addiction safe to talk about in our communities, around our kitchen tables, and – most importantly – in the conference rooms of America.

## IT HAPPENS HERE

The hospitality industry isn't immune to SUD. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration, employees of restaurants and hotels have the highest rates of substance use out of the entire American workforce. Service occupations, such as those in the food and hospitality industries, had the second highest proportion of workers with substance use disorders at 15.6%. A substance use disorder doesn't just affect employees themselves and their families; businesses lose enormous sums every year as a result of the issue in the form of higher healthcare costs, absenteeism, and presenteeism (when employees are at work, but not fully productive).

With substance use rising across the United States, now is the time for

Examining the insidious effects addiction has on the American workforce – including hospitality

by KIRSTEN SUTO SECKLER

**F**OR DECADES, MILLIONS OF Americans have been living with a public health crisis that's killing the equivalent of a 747 plane crash every day. This tragedy is caused by substance use disorder (SUD), a treatable medical condition. Yet shame and judgment make it a crisis no one wants to discuss. While all of this sounds daunting, there is hope. That hope comes from evidence-based solutions that can help change the course of this addiction crisis.

To help save the 49 million people struggling with substance use disorder and the millions more family and friends, the time is now for everyone to work to

“

Employees of restaurants and hotels have the highest rates of substance use out of the entire American workforce. Service occupations, such as those in the food and hospitality industries, had the second highest proportion of workers with substance use disorders at 15.6%.”

the hospitality industry to show its support and be a part of the solution. Hospitality companies have access to millions of employees who need resources and to millions of customers who may need support.

Shatterproof is available to work with companies to create solutions and support. A national nonprofit that believes no one should suffer or die from a substance use disorder, a preventable and treatable disease, Shatterproof provides trusted guidance to communities, removes

systemic and social barriers to recovery, and mobilizes the country to advocate for change and to end addiction stigma. Shatterproof harnesses the models of business, the rigor of science, and the power of a national movement to create change and save lives through three pillars of work: transforming addiction treatment, ending addiction stigma, and educating and empowering our communities.

Through a specially designed approach for the unique and diverse workforce

that comprises the hospitality industry, Shatterproof uses educational programs, training, storytelling, employee support, employee engagement, thought leadership, and customer engagement to make a change and provide support. Shatterproof works with companies to become a best-in-class employer, supporting substance use disorder prevention, treatment, and recovery, creating judgment-free workplaces that support those struggling with SUD and their families, as well as position



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those companies to corporate leaders in addressing this rising public health crisis. In addition, the work reduces the stigma employees have toward their fellow employees impacted by SUD and the self-stigma that employees impacted by SUD have toward themselves.

Some hotels have already started to adopt this work. Working with their human resources teams, Shatterproof customizes the Shatterproof Just Five employee education platform and holds powerful town hall events with authentic and open discussions around SUD. It has been shared that team members appreciated that they had started bringing this treatable medical condition to the forefront at their company. Culture change within their company departments has also been reported. Rather than happy hours, they started seeing teams get together for hikes.

**HELP IS AVAILABLE**

For so long, addiction has been in the shadows, but with the support and engagement of the hospitality industry, it's being brought into the light.

Last year, Rose, a hotel employee in Los Angeles, felt welcome and supported at a Shatterproof Walk. She came to the stage and shared with the hundreds of people at that Walk her milestone of three months of recovery. She was so proud, but more importantly, she was celebrated and not shamed.

Imagine if they all helped lead the way to break down stigma. Imagine if every hotel had a Walk team where we could show that community support. Together, Shatterproof and the industry would reduce those daunting numbers shared earlier and increase the number of people in recovery from 22 million to millions more.

The time is now to unite and help save the lives of loved ones, employees, customers, and those in your communities. Together, we will move closer to reversing the addiction crisis in the United States and shielding millions of families from its shattering effects. ■

*Learn more about Shatterproof at [www.Shatterproof.org](http://www.Shatterproof.org). If you are interested in learning more about how Shatterproof can help your company, contact Kirsten at [Seckler.kseckler@shatterproof.org](mailto:Seckler.kseckler@shatterproof.org).*



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Insights from your AAHOA Officers on the state of the industry, the growth AAHOA has seen during the past year, and the constant need for new leaders to step up

by TOM GRESHAM

# Pulse check

**J**UST AHEAD OF THE AAHOACON KICKOFF EACH YEAR, WE TAKE the opportunity to sit down with the current AAHOA Officers to gather their insights on the current state of hospitality and AAHOA as a whole, while learning more about their direct involvement in helping push the association and industry forward. Read on to learn more about where the industry is headed and how AAHOA will help shape that future for the better.

## Bharat Patel, CHO, CHIA, Chairman

### WHAT AAHOA ACCOMPLISHMENT DURING THE PAST YEAR ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?

We did a lot of work this past year to boost AAHOA's advocacy efforts – on the federal, state, and local levels, which has renewed the faith of the membership in the association. There's a re-engagement, if you will. We also held more than 55 town halls and 25 regionals. We're the voice of hotel owners, and that's a big goal to live up to, but it's one I felt we met this past year.

### HOW CAN AAHOA SHAPE THE CAREER TRAJECTORIES OF ITS MEMBERS?

Professional development and education are two of our core pillars, and we spend a lot of energy focusing on equipping our members for the challenges of this new economy. In February, we held our HYPE event, which is tailored specifically for young professionals, and we have HerOwnership events specifically for women hotel owners as well.

This is one of the few industries where you can start at the bottom and really work your way up to the top. Really, the only requirements are being presentable, eager, and showing up to work on time. Everything else can be taught. It's an easy entry that doesn't have a high educational barrier. But, because of that, it's vital that AAHOA provide as many education and training opportunities as possible for our members and their staff.

### WHAT SHOULD HOTELIERS BE MOST CONCERNED ABOUT IN THE NEXT FEW YEARS?

I think it's a trifecta; rising interest rates and labor costs, along with skyrocketing insurance premiums, are going to be the key difficulties we'll face for the foreseeable future.

We are continuing to experience problems with obtaining insurance, and once we receive coverage, the premiums are so high that it's significantly affecting cash flow. Next is the cost and available pool of labor. We will always need people, but we can do a better job of leveraging technology to be more efficient and need fewer people. Third is rising interest rates. The days of borrowing a couple million dollars at 4%, 5%, or 6% are gone. Today's higher interest rates drastically affect our bottom line, which means it's harder to pay market wages, which then destroys our labor pool.

### COULD YOU TALK ABOUT WHAT FIRST PROMPTED YOU TO RUN FOR A POSITION AS AAHOA OFFICER?

Ultimately, I thought I could make a difference, and I believe we all owe it to the industry, our families, and ourselves to put in the time to help make our industry the best it can be. Many people join AAHOA because of the need for professional growth. But, by stepping up to lead within AAHOA, you are making a personal investment in yourself. I'm a different person now than I was when I started serving in the best way possible.



## **WHAT AAHOA ACCOMPLISHMENT DURING THE PAST YEAR ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?**

In the past year, we've worked incredibly hard to engage on membership's interests, understand their problems, and get a feel of where the industry is going and where AAHOA needs to be to help our members. We've re-engaged the membership through events and open forums, so we now have a roadmap, and I have a better understanding of their needs as I prepare for my year as Chairman to evolve and enhance the lodging industry for the better.

## **HOW CAN AAHOA USE ITS KNOWLEDGE AND RESOURCES TO PREPARE ITSELF TO CONTINUE TO LEAD THE INDUSTRY?**

Focusing on strategy to lay the foundation for a better tomorrow that reflects the aspirations, needs, and challenges of today is going to help project AAHOA's growth trajectory. We have to focus on tomorrow instead of the past. The past helps us build on strategies, but if we aren't strategic, we're not going to accomplish much.

## **COULD YOU ELABORATE ON ANY SPECIFIC SUCCESS STORIES RELATED TO THE ASSOCIATION'S ENHANCED ADVOCACY EFFORTS THAT PARTICULARLY STAND OUT TO YOU?**

On the state level, I'm really proud we were able to create much stronger relationships with our state associations around the country. While we did that, we engaged the interests of the membership as well, asking, "What can we do on the local level?" Federally, we've regrouped and refocused to make sure we're ahead of the game, but we are placing much more of a priority on local and state issues than before.

## **WHAT SHOULD HOTELIERS BE MOST CONCERNED ABOUT IN THE NEXT FEW YEARS?**

At the end of the day, the biggest concerns about future growth are decreasing profitability and NOI. Are we going to make money? We need to address the problems with brand partners and we have to work together to ensure NOI is there. From the franchising perspective, the biggest problems I see are brand dilution, as well as a lack of innovation and forward-thinking technology solutions. Disruptors like Airbnb, Vrbo, and OTAs continue to chip away at profitability.

## **IS THE LABOR SHORTAGE SOMETHING HOTEL LEADERS SIMPLY NEED TO ACCEPT AS AN UNCHANGEABLE REALITY?**

The cost of hospitality labor represents a pressing challenge for hoteliers – even pre-COVID. We have to think outside of the box to maintain financial viability while ensuring a high level of service. And there's other aspects in there, including recruitment and retention, are a problem, so we need industry-wide innovations.

## **HOW IS AAHOA FULFILLING ITS VISION TO BE THE FOREMOST ADVOCATE AND RESOURCE FOR HOTEL OWNERS?**

Implementing the correct agenda items to advocate for is how we solve problems, including continued advocacy, which has been a much bigger focus for AAHOA recently, and it's yielding positive results. But I also want members to feel more empowered to connect with their legislators, so our nation's lawmakers truly understand our industry's unique needs.

**Miraj S. Patel,  
MBA, CHO, CHIA  
Vice Chairman**





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## Kamalesh (KP) Patel, Treasurer



### **WHAT AAHOA ACCOMPLISHMENT DURING THE PAST YEAR ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?**

Rather than point to one achievement, I'll say AAHOA has laid a hell of a foundation moving forward. Our efforts to step up our advocacy, fair franchising, labor, and member-focused initiatives, have all increased this past year. It's almost like we're rebuilding a football team – putting the pieces in place and watching excitedly as that success starts to happen.

### **HOW CAN AAHOA SHAPE THE CAREER TRAJECTORIES OF ITS MEMBERS?**

AAHOA opens more doors, more network opportunities, more contacts than any other association. Hands down. Nobody can offer you what AAHOA can offer. You want to meet with any major vendor, brand, or elected official? AAHOA can put you in front of them. AAHOA is going to give you the opportunity to become what you want. And if you don't know what direction you want to go in, we have some incredible mentors. We have countless seminars, sessions, and educational platforms that can equip you for success in the long-term.

### **WHAT SHOULD HOTELIERS BE MOST CONCERNED ABOUT IN THE NEXT FEW YEARS?**

Sometimes we get complacent. What the industry was 20, 30, 40 years ago is not what it is today. Don't be afraid of using technology. Don't be afraid of asking questions. Don't be afraid of learning. The way we used to do business is not how we do it today. Think outside the box, get out of your comfort zone, and see what's available.

### **IS THE LABOR SHORTAGE SOMETHING HOTEL LEADERS SIMPLY NEED TO ACCEPT AS AN UNCHANGEABLE REALITY?**

We've gone through labor shortages before, but it feels more aggressive and prominent now. But the beauty of AAHOA is we're resilient; we know how to adapt. At my properties, I've had difficulties hiring, just like everyone else. So I've implemented technologies like a front-desk kiosk, and that's going to be a big pathway toward ensuring we can work within the constraints of the current labor market.

### **HOW IS AAHOA FULFILLING ITS VISION TO BE THE FOREMOST ADVOCATE AND RESOURCE FOR HOTEL OWNERS?**

The beauty of AAHOA is it's for owners by owners. What you're going through is what I'm going through. Because its leaders are always hoteliers, AAHOA is always going to be advocating on behalf of its members in particular – working with brand partners, for example, to ensure members are protected and their concerns are being heard and addressed. Additionally, we're working with multiple insurance companies because it's very challenging for some properties to even get coverage.

### **WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO ANYONE WHO HASN'T YET CONSIDERED SERVING A LEADERSHIP ROLE?**

Do it. Get involved. Don't stand on the sidelines saying, "This is somebody else's problem; somebody will fix it for me." It's your business, your industry, your livelihood. This is how you're going to put food on the table for your family. Be the change you want to see.

**Rahul Patel,  
Secretary**



**WHAT AAHOA ACCOMPLISHMENT DURING THE PAST YEAR ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?**

We've successfully changed the operations platform that AAHOA uses, moving away from a third-party software for association management, and we now have our own in-house software. It's a project I was proud to lead. We used to spend a lot of money on cookie-cutter software where we couldn't use certain parts of it or it didn't fully serve our needs. This allows us to operate more efficiently.

**ARE THERE ANY SPECIFIC SUCCESS STORIES RELATED TO AAHOA'S ADVOCACY EFFORTS THAT STAND OUT TO YOU?**

AAHOA has been working at the national and local level equally. Where AAHOA once focused much more on the federal level, we're now developing deeper and more strategic partnerships with state-level associations that will help us more on the state and local levels around the country.

**WHAT SHOULD HOTELIERS BE MOST CONCERNED ABOUT IN THE NEXT FEW YEARS?**

Interest rates are rising and that's really scary for many reasons, including refinancing. Also, the insurance market has been very, very difficult. We're seeing rates go up 30 to 40% in some cases. In addition, we're continuing to see the ongoing labor shortage, which is driving up costs.

**IS THE LABOR SHORTAGE SOMETHING HOTEL LEADERS SIMPLY NEED TO ACCEPT AS AN UNCHANGEABLE REALITY?**

I hope we don't accept it, but even if that's the reality, we have to find a solution that doesn't compromise the guest experience. If guests don't have a good experience, they won't come back.

**HOW IS AAHOA IS FULFILLING ITS VISION TO BE THE FOREMOST ADVOCATE AND RESOURCE FOR HOTEL OWNERS?**

AAHOA is the voice of our members. Our aim is to connect with legislators, the brands, the FTC, or anyone who can help us shape the industry's future. AAHOA provides big-picture guidance, consultation, and advocacy all in the name of creating a better tomorrow.

**WHAT FIRST PROMPTED YOU TO RUN FOR A POSITION AS AN AAHOA OFFICER?**

I have a passion to serve and first served as an ambassador many years ago because of the unique needs we have in Florida and felt obligated to get involved to try and address some of those issues. I really wanted to serve at the highest level because that's where I felt I could be most effective.

**WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO ANYONE WHO HASN'T YET CONSIDERED SERVING OHIO IN A LEADERSHIP ROLE?**

I consider serving at any level to be leadership. As AAHOA Members, we're all leaders within our own organizations, so it's the logical next step to share those skills and that drive to lead with AAHOA. Hotel ownership can be a profitable and rewarding venture, and we expect it to be that way forever. But, to protect that profitability, you have to serve. New people bring new ideas and approaches to solve new and existing problems and keep the industry protected. ■

# Harnessing the **POWER** of the AAHOA network

Members forge connections to share best practices and business opportunities

by NICK FORTUNA

DISK/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM, EVGENIYQW/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM, MARTIN CAPEK/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

**A** **S A 28-YEAR-OLD HOTELIER** operating three Motel 6 properties for his family, Ronak Patel certainly doesn't lack energy or ambition. But after meeting so many young hoteliers at AAHOA's inaugural HYPE Ownership Conference, he felt invigorated, and his goals were bigger than ever before.

Patel and about 200 other AAHOA Members gathered in New Orleans in February for the two-day HYPE Ownership Conference, aimed at nurturing the next generation of hospitality leaders. During the past three years, he'd enjoyed meeting established hoteliers at AAHOA events, but the HYPE Ownership Conference proved an eye-opening experience.

"I had no idea there were this many very smart, young people in AAHOA," he said. "It was nice to hear about their backgrounds and how they've grown and developed. I'm trying to follow the same steps and become more successful, and it helps to see other people striving for that and achieving that. Now, I have to raise my own professional level to meet them. I can't stay stuck where I am."

Several HYPE attendees invited Patel to invest in their projects, while others spoke to him about hotel construction and development, piquing his interest.

Based in Portland, OR, Patel and his extended family have about 10 economy hotels in their portfolio, but HYPE has inspired him to aim higher. When he attends AAHOACON24 in Orlando, FL, this month, he said his top priority will be meeting with hotel brokers and lenders.

"It's rare to have that many hotel brokers and lenders in one place at



the same time,” Patel said. “That’s my next step – to figure out how to get a couple more hotels added to our portfolio.”

For Patel, HYPE and AAHOACON illustrate the power of the AAHOA network. After obtaining a master’s degree in business analytics from Hult International Business School, he figured he’d work in the tech industry. But then the pandemic struck, and good job opportunities became scarce for a time. He’d never

considered joining the family business, but being stuck at home made him bored and depressed, so he eventually began servicing the vending machines at one property.

That experience sparked his interest in the industry, and he quickly took on more responsibilities. Patel attended AAHOACON21 in Dallas and said the educational opportunities helped to prepare him to run multiple hotels at once.

“

When you’re trying to build your business, it’s critical that you surround yourself with the right people, and there’s no better place to do that than through AAHOA.”

Patel said AAHOA events provide opportunities to network and share best practices. At recent events, for example, he’s asked members for advice in dealing with rising insurance costs and discussed which online organizational tool is best. Based on recommendations from fellow AAHOA Members, he recently started using a different credit-card processing service at his properties, seeking a streamlined process for chargebacks.

“For people starting out in their hospitality careers, I view AAHOA as a great resource because the education sessions are very useful,” Patel said. “I also think that what AAHOA is doing with young professionals to help them grow in their careers is especially valuable. I really do think AAHOA membership is beneficial, whether you’re the smallest of hotel operators or one of the largest.”

**MEMBERS WORKING TOGETHER**

Patel, an AAHOA Ambassador, said collaboration between AAHOA Members helped Portland’s unhoused population make it through a powerful winter storm in January.

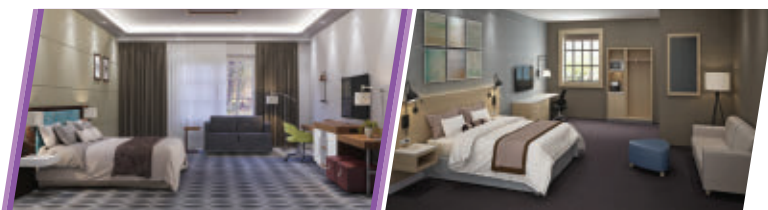
With freezing temperatures expected, Patel reached out to local AAHOA Members through their group chat and compiled a list of almost 20 properties that could be used as warming centers. He then contacted local health officials, telling them hoteliers were prepared to serve as a resource for this vulnerable population.

“AAHOA Members got to pull in new revenue and help the community to get people out of the cold, so it was a win-win,” Patel said. “Every hotel on the list was completely packed.”

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Patel said AAHOA membership has driven him to become more politically active, recognizing that the decisions of local, state, and federal legislators impact the hospitality industry in major ways. For the past few years, he's participated in AAHOA's regular visits to Capitol Hill, speaking with congressmen about policy issues such as the need for more immigrant work visas to alleviate the protracted labor shortage.

"AAHOA really does quite a lot for the industry," he said.

Like Patel, Digvijay (Danny) Gaekwad said he's benefited greatly from the AAHOA network. Born in Baroda in western India, Gaekwad moved with his wife to the United States in 1987 and quickly built a chain of convenience stores and a medical billing and transcription company. Despite that success, he realized upon entering the hospitality industry in 1997 that he had a lot to learn.

Gaekwad became a regular at AAHOA events, finding the networking and educational components of AAHOACON especially beneficial and soaking up knowledge from industry leaders such as Mukesh (Mike) Patel, the Atlanta hotelier who served as AAHOA's chairman in 1998.

Fast forward to today, and Gaekwad, based in Ocala, FL, is among the state's most prominent real estate developers and entrepreneurs, having had his picture taken with Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump, along with Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis.

"When I came to this country, there was only one organization that could give me direction and teach me how to own and operate a hotel, and that was AAHOA," Gaekwad said. "Whenever I had a question, whether it was about finding a good contractor, getting financing or choosing furniture, fixtures, and equipment, I could turn to AAHOA Members for help, and that was invaluable."

Gaekwad, chair of AAHOA's Government Affairs Committee, said the association's advocacy for the industry ensures hoteliers benefit from AAHOA membership regardless of whether they ever attend a function. But he said members who miss out on AAHOACON and other major events are shortchanging themselves.

"I don't think there is any hotel industry group in the world that organizes a better convention than us," he said. "Everything is in one place. What more could you want?"

### SUCCESS ON THE SMALL SCREEN

Brandy Conner, principal of My Hotel Reputation, said the AAHOA network has been instrumental in the success of her company, which provides services such

as review response, social media management, virtual guidebooks, and QR integrations. Since attending her first AAHOA regional meeting in Cherry Hill, NJ, several years ago, Conner has made it a point to participate in AAHOA events and network with hoteliers.

"There's such a strong sense of community among AAHOA Members, and that's helped my business to thrive because if you have a good reputation and people

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like the services you're offering, members will refer you to other members," she said. "That's been fundamental to the success of my business, so I'm very thankful to AAHOA."

Conner said the AAHOA community embraced her from the start, with New Jersey-based hotelier Mahendra (MZ) Patel, AAHOA's Mid-Atlantic Regional Director, taking her under his wing and helping her to foster connections. A guest

appearance on Patel's TV Asia show, "Hotel Insight," led to Conner landing her own show on the network. "Hotel Incredible," in which Conner visits unique boutique hotels across the country, recently began filming its third season.

"The show has been so much fun, and there's no way I would have had that opportunity if it weren't for AAHOA," she said.

Conner said she learned how to create websites and market properties while

renting out her own residential homes on Airbnb. She then offered those services to bed-and-breakfasts, vacation rentals, and small hotels before joining AAHOA and rapidly growing her client base.

Networking with AAHOA Members inspired Conner to join the ranks of hoteliers in 2020, when she purchased a 13-room motel in Wyoming. She recently closed on her seventh property and now owns motels in South Dakota, Michigan, Illinois, and Minnesota. An onsite manager at each property tends to guests' needs while she handles other aspects of operations from her base in Colorado Springs, CO.

### IT'S ALL CONNECTED

"From my experience with AAHOA, and seeing the strength of that community, I felt confident enough to buy my first motel, and I've had tremendous success with it utilizing my background in marketing," Conner said. "I never would have considered buying little hotels if it wasn't for my involvement with AAHOA. Buying a hotel is big thing, but you can start out small and work your way up, and that's something I learned from AAHOA Members."

Having benefited from AAHOA membership, Conner said she wants to help other members by participating in educational events and sharing her best practices for managing boutique hotels. Technologies such as self-service check-in are enabling her to operate hotels efficiently while still leaving her time to raise a family, she said.

"When I tell members about what I'm doing, their eyes just light up," she said. "These properties actually can be really profitable, and you're not handcuffed to your job. I don't live where these properties are located, but they're all operating successfully."

Looking back, Conner said she's glad she attended that first AAHOA Regional Conference, which helped to fuel her rapid career growth.

"The thing that separates AAHOA from other organizations is that sense of community – how close-knit everyone is," she said. "When you're trying to build your business, it's critical that you surround yourself with the right people, and there's no better place to do that than through AAHOA." ■

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# Go behind the scenes



United States Representative Buddy Carter (R-GA) visited an AAHOA Member-owned hotel in Savannah in September 2023.

Cultivating meaningful relationships with federal, state, and local legislators via Back of the House Tours

by JODI SCOTT

**A**S THE U.S. GEARS UP FOR A major election year, with 468 Congressional seats up for grabs, it's more important than ever for AAHOA Members to build relationships with their senators and representatives.

One effective way to ensure their voices are heard – and to further cultivate meaningful relationships – is for members to host Back of the House tours at their hotels. These tours allow Congressional members to gain a deeper understanding of AAHOA Member priorities upon their return to Washington, D.C. Hosting a Back of the House Tour provides members of Congress with firsthand experience, enabling them to witness the positive and irreplaceable impact that small business owners have on their communities. It also



United States Representative Jasmine Crockett (D-TX) visited an AAHOA Member-owned property in her district in South Dallas in October 2023.

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“

These types of events are a straightforward way for AAHOA Members to connect with legislators and educate them on the issues specific to operating a hotel, thus furthering the connection between representatives and an industry that needs all the help it can get in challenging harmful legislation and enacting policies that will help the industry continue to thrive.”





offers AAHOA Members the opportunity to build relationships directly with their government representatives.

AAHOA Members hosted seven Back of the House tours with Congressional members in 2023 including properties in Georgia, California, Texas, and Oklahoma. The tours received extensive media coverage, highlighting the work of AAHOA Members as they endeavor to make federal legislators aware of the issues facing hoteliers.

As just one example of a successful Back of the House tour, U.S. Rep. Buddy Carter (R-GA), who represents Georgia's 1st Congressional District, visited an AAHOA Member-owned hotel in Savannah in September of 2023. He toured the property and discussed top priority issues with local hoteliers. AAHOA Young Professional Director Eastern Division Dylan Patel led the tour alongside dedicated member Kal Patel and the hotel's staff. They highlighted the hotel's diverse facilities and services and provided insights into the daily operations and the challenges confronting hoteliers in the region.

"Congressman Carter used to work at a hotel himself and has a great appreciation for all that we and our staff do to maintain and manage our properties efficiently," Dylan Patel said.

These types of events are a straightforward way for AAHOA Members to connect with legislators and educate them on the issues specific to operating a hotel, thus furthering the connection between representatives and an industry that needs all the help it can get in challenging harmful legislation and enacting policies that will help the industry continue to thrive. ■



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# Past perspectives

Past chairs share their thoughts on AAHOA's history, its future, and its role in bridging the two

by CARTER DAVIS

**IT'S DIFFICULT TO BELIEVE, BUT 2024 MARKS AAHOA'S 35TH ANNIVERSARY.** Throughout that time, AAHOA has been fortunate enough to have countless talented, selfless, and visionary leaders among its ranks. To mark the occasion, we're catching up with a few of AAHOA's Past Chairs who helped lead this organization and remain key influential pillars in the industry.

## Nitin Shah

1993-1994  
Chairman



In my time, our main obstacles included discrimination, establishing the infrastructure, and having enough members and money. Now, that era has gone. We have the money; we have the office; we have the infrastructure. I think the biggest worry now is the franchising component. What used to cost 5% to franchisees has risen to 15% or 20%. In our time, there was no Expedia or hotels.com. So, on top of franchising fees, we're paying third-party fees. And then you have Washington, D.C., coming up with all kinds of regulations. In my opinion, the focus should remain on helping hotel owners at a grassroots level.



## Mukesh (Mike) Patel

1998-1999 Chairman

Ownership of hotels by Indian-American immigrants grew steadily and dramatically during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, yet there was considerable discrimination against our community by brands, banks, and insurers. And many non-Indian owners openly advertised their properties as "American-owned." AAHOA

was formed to fight this discrimination and

to leverage the emerging economic power of Indian owners.

AAHOA has gone from a little-noticed startup to being a respected powerhouse in the hotel industry. We've earned that distinction by challenging the status quo on behalf of our members.

Our changing role in the hotel industry can be attributed to the changing characteristics of our owners. Initially we were a group of "accidental hoteliers" who hadn't studied to be hoteliers or business owners, who were immigrants with few resources, and who often didn't speak English as our native language.

Today, AAHOA members are typically second- and third-generation hoteliers who were born in the U.S. and speak fluent English, studied business or hospitality, and have the benefit of considerable financial resources. This makes us an organization that's more sophisticated, more capable, and more entitled to shaping our industry.



## Naresh (Nash) Patel

2004-2005 Chairman

Reflecting on AAHOA's remarkable 35-year journey brings a deep sense of pride and gratitude. My involvement with AAHOA was inspired by a shared commitment of hotel owners to foster collaboration and advocate for our collective interests. Observing AAHOA's evolution since my initial membership has been a testament to its adaptability, embracing technological advancements, and expanding support services for members.

Looking forward, I envision AAHOA's continued growth through educational initiatives, expanded networking opportunities, and proactive advocacy on behalf of hotel owners. In navigating the dynamic hospitality landscape, AAHOA must persist in representing members' interests and remaining ahead of emerging trends.

The establishment of AAHOA was pivotal in providing a unified voice for hotel owners, promoting equitable practices and industry-friendly policies. Today, it stands as a platform for networking, knowledge-sharing, and collective advocacy.



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## Hemant Patel

2011-2012 Chairman

As one of the founding members of the AAHOA Board of Directors, I've been fortunate enough to share my volunteer service with many different community, city, and state organizations through the years. I was initially drawn to AAHOA because of the strength of the membership, and that strength remains as evident as ever today. The strength of the membership and our voices gives us better bargaining power in the industry.

During my tenure as AAHOA Chairman, I helped lead the expansion of the AAHOA Government Affairs office, because it was clear hoteliers' interests weren't being relayed to the legislators in our nation's capital and around the country. Despite all the progress we've made, I believe AAHOA remains vital in the future vision of the industry.



## Alkesh Patel

2012-2013 Chairman

AAHOA is the only association that provides the insight and resources necessary for the hoteliers and entrepreneurs looking to be hotel owners, and the organization has become the voice of the industry by representing the largest hotel owner and operator community.

In the future, AAHOA should continue to work hard to address the ongoing issues faced by today's hoteliers, including franchising, financing, development, and operations.

The growth of the association speaks for itself as to why it was important to establish AAHOA. And, as we continue to grow, member needs and issues inevitably will change, so it's necessary to have an association that provides a collective voice throughout that evolution.

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**Bharat (Bruce) Patel**  
 2016-2017 Chairman

A collaborative AAHOA is the most productive kind of AAHOA. My hope is that our influence will aid our members and the industry as a whole to continue to grow. I envision future generations of hotel owners bringing new and innovative ideas that we can all benefit from together.

The hotel industry is a constantly evolving field, with new issues and concerns arising frequently. These issues include the state of the economy, maintaining a healthy balance between franchisors and franchisees, navigating the regulatory environment, and keeping up with potential legislation that could affect AAHOA Members and small businesses in the United States. We need to find solutions that benefit all parties involved so AAHOA Members can thrive, and our industry as a whole can continue to grow, creating opportunities for future generations.

AAHOA is the most active association of its kind, bringing members together through 150-plus events each year, including the industry's largest trade show, AAHOACON. The networking opportunities alone have provided immense value to all attendees. AAHOA's place in our industry has been deservedly established.

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## Bhavesh Patel

2017-2018  
Chairman

AAHOA has grown leaps and bounds since I became a member, by having a stronger voice in D.C. and on the state levels, adding more educational tools to help members, offering a massive Trade Show at AAHOACON with numerous value-added benefits to help members become better operators and owners.

AAHOA still has a long way to go. We need more of a unified voice, better working relationships with state associations, more ways to help members save money to get a better bottom line, additional ways to grow AAHOA's bottom line to add more value for its members, and adopt new technologies that will help evolve the industry.

Education is the key to the success of AAHOA Members. The industry is always being targeted, and we need protection. Who else but associations like AAHOA to help protect us all?

## Jagruti Panwala

2019-2020  
Chairwoman



All of us have moments of “tunnel vision” where we must concentrate on our day-to-day responsibilities at our companies and individual hotel properties and this is important, obviously.

However, we don't operate our businesses in a vacuum. There are market and regulatory forces outside our control as individuals and must be tackled together through the relationships and networks we build. This allows us to have more focused and strategic discussions with lawmakers, vendors, and brand partners across the lodging industry to ensure our collective voice is being heard. That, in a nutshell, is the importance of AAHOA.

I can personally attest that much of any success I've had in this industry can be attributed to the guidance, support, and collective effort I've received from my fellow AAHOA Members. None of us can achieve success alone.



## Vinay Patel

2021-2022 Chair

I originally got involved with AAHOA because it was an opportunity to collaborate and help the industry as a whole. When you look back at AAHOA, as a membership group, the hoteliers have done so much for the industry. During the past 20 years, you talk about development and innovation to different brands – such as Hilton, Marriott, Choice, Wyndham – and a lot of what they're able to do right now is because of the AAHOA membership.

I've been a member since 1992 and have seen the association evolve during the past 20 to 30 years in many different facets. Originally, AAHOA was small-time owners. All of a sudden, they now own big brands and larger properties. Now, there are big-time hoteliers. Nowadays, you see a lot of second- and third-generation hoteliers, and franchising is a big issue. The association constantly keeps pivoting to what the member needs and wants are. Some people don't like constant change, but sometimes change is exactly what we need to evolve with the times.

I hope the association continues to be a pillar for the industry. I hope we're able to continue to evolve based on what our membership wants and in the next 10, 15, 20, 30 years – 100 years, even – everyone will say, 'This association continues to keep changing based on what the membership really wants.' And I think it will, too.

## Nishant (Neal) Patel

2022-2023 Chairman



AAHOA has changed tremendously since I first became a member. For one, AAHOA has been broadening its views as an association; we're looking at things that we may have never looked at before. For example, AAHOA is helping members learn about incorporating technology to streamline the way we do business. AAHOA also holds hundreds of different events to cater different demographics. With events like HerOwnership or HYPE Ownership, AAHOA is launching initiatives aimed at hoteliers from all walks of life, and that's something we never really did in the past.

The way I would like to see AAHOA's growth and evolution manifest itself in the future is by ensuring every hotelier is an AAHOA Member. AAHOA is making waves in Washington D.C., but our reach shouldn't stop there. AAHOA can help create relationships between the United States and other countries. We can help facilitate business between our membership and hoteliers around the world. ■

# THANK YOU!

**Thank you to everyone who has helped lead AAHOA for the past 35 years, including every past chair for their selfless dedication to improving the industry one day at a time.**

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*– Muhammad Ali*



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**IT'S A POST-COVID WORLD, BUT** it's far from normal both personally and professionally. How we live our lives and conduct business has changed. At the forefront of these changes is the increased inflationary pressure on goods and services we continue to face. We've watched prices go up on everything – from the most basic household items to the cost of operating businesses. Since the pandemic, daily headlines and overarching pressure to increase prices have sent property taxes, government and private employment wages, and the cost of services sky high. This is new territory for many, as the U.S. economy hasn't faced a real recession since the influx of cash from both the federal government and the Federal Reserve.

Yet even though recent fiscal and monetary policies are showing signs of reversing the trend, inflationary pressures aren't diminishing as quickly as business owners would like. Furthermore, during this economic slowdown (mainly led by elevated interest rates), hotel revenues haven't increased at the same pace as hotel expenses.

### IMPACT ON HOTEL VALUATIONS

For limited- and select-service hotels with a Hilton, Marriott, Hyatt, or IHG brand, revenues have increased marginally and may even be close to 2019 levels. However, room expenses, along with general and administrative expenses, have also increased, and at a faster pace than room revenue. Today's average hotel housekeeper is being paid at least 20% to 30% higher wages than he or she made pre-pandemic. Likewise, a typical hotel general manager (tracked within the general administrative section of hotel) is earning 10% to 15% more today than before COVID hit. These increases have directly impacted hotels' gross operating profit (GOP) and net operating income (NOI).

Hospitality is as much of an operating business as a real estate transaction. From a pure real estate standpoint, hotel appraisers, valuation experts, and lenders look at the bottom line to determine the level of debt the hotel can support.

The new economy's effect on hotel operating metrics, asset valuation, and the capital markets

by RUSHI SHAH

## The market

# MYST

Because of these ongoing pricing pressures, hotel NOI and GOP have plummeted. For example, before the pandemic, a limited- or select-service hotel – such as a Hampton Inn or Fairfield Inn – would typically drop 35% to 38% of top-line revenue to the bottom line as NOI, or 45% to 47% as GOP. Due to wage and cost pressures, as well as the increase in property taxes and insurance, NOI percentages in the new world are landing at 32%. Rate pressure and higher supply costs have also moved GOP margins closer to 43%. As a result, a hotel that brings in \$3.5 million in room revenue and previously had an NOI of \$1.225 million, now has an NOI closer to \$1.1 million, which is a 10% reduction. If this calculation holds true and all else being equal, the value of the hotel should also drop by 10%.

Looking at this situation and adding in higher interest rates and subsequent higher cap rates, theoretically hotel values should drop even further. That's not happening, however. It's clear that many buyers and sellers have not realized their new

reality – not to mention costs to replace properties continue to rise. These factors make a case for owners to increase asset prices. When market conditions finally stabilize, however, the crystal ball suggests there will be a slight correction in valuations. Alternatively, hotel ADR will need to rise significantly to keep up with the debt load of these properties.

### EFFECTS ON LEVERAGE & FINANCING

NOI compression directly impacts how capital markets, mainly commercial mortgage-backed securities (CMBS) and life insurance companies, evaluate hotels seeking financing. In the previous limited-service hotel with \$1.225 million NOI example, a CMBS lender could size the

“

When market conditions finally stabilize, however, the crystal ball suggests there will be a slight correction in valuations. Alternatively, hotel ADR will need to rise significantly to keep up with the debt load of these properties.”

# EVERY



loan at \$10 million. With a new, lower NOI of \$1.1 million, however, that same asset could only support a \$9 million loan amount. If the asset then trades for \$15 million, the loan to value (LTV) would have to drop from 67% to 60% LTV. As a result, the borrower would need to bring 7% more equity to the closing table. This type of leveraging creates additional headwinds for hospitality and reduces the expected return for hotel investors.

### GETTING TO THE CLOSING TABLE

To navigate today's economic environment, hotels will need to embrace strategies that increase revenues, mainly by

pushing ADR for their assets to keep valuations from getting ahead of themselves. Getting expert help can significantly improve the outcome. An experienced intermediary or banker will know expense industry standards. More importantly they will know how to adjust for one-time, extraordinary CapEx and other expenses to bring cashflows to a more normalized level for lenders and capital sources to evaluate. It's extremely important to choose the right person to shepherd your transaction because this type of tacit knowledge is invaluable to getting your deal over the finish line. ■



*Rushi Shah is Principal and CEO of the commercial mortgage and real estate investment banking firm and AAHOA Allied Member Mag Mile Capital. As a leader in hospitality financing,*

*Shah specializes in structuring and placing high leverage, nonrecourse bridge and permanent debt with cash out for full- and limited-service hotels nationwide. Since joining the firm's predecessor, Aries Capital, in 2015, Shah has structured and closed hundreds of millions in financing for all property types. Shah has held previous positions at Northern Trust and has an MBA from the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business.*



# Read before signing

by POOJA MEHTA, ESQ.

**I**N THE ERA OF E-SIGNATURES AND QUICK transactions, it's easy to underestimate the importance of meticulously reviewing and negotiating hotel contracts before signing on the dotted line. Your signature isn't just a formality; it carries weight. Whether you're buying a hotel property, transitioning operations, or entering into a franchise agreement, dedicating time to scrutinize and negotiate contract terms is paramount. Here, we'll explore four prevalent types of contracts in the hotel industry: purchase and sale agreements, franchise agreements, third-party management agreements, and lease agreements.

## 1 PURCHASE AND SALE AGREEMENTS

Conducting a comprehensive review and negotiation of your PSA is crucial for ensuring a smooth and advantageous transaction. PSAs serve as blueprints for the escrow process as well as post-closing rights and responsibilities. Beyond the fundamental terms like purchase price and closing date, it's critical to:

- Clearly delineate terms like franchise and financing contingencies to avoid misunderstandings.
- Have a well-drafted due diligence provision to address when and how earnest money will be refundable, what contracts the buyer will assume, and how inspections will be conducted.
- Incorporate reciprocal warranties and indemnities to safeguard both parties post-closing.

### PRO TIP:

*Beware of first right of refusal clauses, which essentially require franchisor's approval before you can sell your property.*

## 2

### THIRD-PARTY MANAGEMENT AGREEMENTS

Vigilant examination of third-party management agreements is vital for ensuring a hotel’s profitability and effective management performance. These contracts outline key responsibilities, performance metrics, and financial arrangements, providing clarity on the roles and expectations of manager and owner. By addressing potential ambiguities or discrepancies upfront, owners can prevent misunderstandings and legal disputes that may arise during the course of the contract. Key considerations entail:

- Aligning business objectives with the management company’s strategies.
- Optimizing fees, bonuses, and performance benchmarks.
- Implementing cure periods and termination clauses to address non-performance issues effectively.

A meticulous review and negotiation process mitigates risks and fosters a constructive owner-management relationship. It allows for both parties to thrive together.

## 3

### FRANCHISE AGREEMENTS

Reviewing franchise agreements allows potential franchisees to comprehend the terms and conditions set forth by the franchisor. These may include fees, reservation/revenue management services, operational standards, and opening obligations. Understanding these elements in addition to the countless other provisions of the typical hotel franchise agreement is essential for making informed decisions about your investment and operational aspects of the franchise. Key elements to negotiate include:

- Royalty fees, marketing contributions, and protected territorial rights.
- Cap liquidated damages and establish termination windows.
- Indemnities, insurance requirements, and events of default.

### PRO TIP:

*Negotiate closing and due diligence extensions prior to signing to allow for flexibility throughout the process.*

Investing time in reviewing and negotiating franchise agreements lays the groundwork for a prosperous partnership and prevents surprise or regret down the road.

## 4

### LEASE AGREEMENTS

Thoughtful drafting of hotel lease agreements is necessary for both tenants and landlords. For tenants, a comprehensive review of the lease agreement allows for clarity on terms, which helps tenants plan their budget effectively and ensures they are not caught off guard by unexpected expenses. On the other hand, landlords must also carefully assess lease agreements to safeguard their physical property and financial interests. Key steps include:

- Clarifying lease duration, renewal options, and termination procedures.
- Establishing terms related to rent increases, property maintenance, and dispute resolution.
- Negotiating equitable terms that align with market value and business plans.

### PRO TIP:

*Discuss tenant-made capital improvements and parties’ rights in the event of early termination or upon sale of the property.*

Transparent communication and cooperation establish a robust foundation for a successful hotel lease.

Navigating the language and structure of hotel contracts demands diligence and attention to detail. A thorough review and negotiation process ensures all parties are secured and positioned for success in our dynamic industry. Should you need assistance in drafting, reviewing, or negotiating a hotel contract, consider consulting an attorney who is well-versed in hotel operations and contract law. You or your counsel should take the time to think of all the things that could go wrong and incorporate a well-defined plan before signing by any contract. ■

### PRO TIP:

*Keep in mind the party drafting the contract will likely include language that prioritizes their interests, so if you are the reviewing party, you must analyze the contract meticulously.*



*Pooja Mehta, Esq., is the managing attorney for DPA Attorneys at Law, a California-based firm specializing in numerous areas of expertise, including ADA issues, contract review and drafting, employment litigation and compliance, franchise litigation and negotiations, real estate transactions, and more. She is a defense attorney who fights for business owners alongside the team at DPA Attorneys at Law. With hotel operations and development background, her practice areas include franchise negotiations, employment disputes, real estate, ADA defense, and contract review/drafting.*

# CRISIS

## under control

2

### Taming construction costs with creative, efficient design

by STEPHEN OVERCASH

**H**OTEL CONSTRUCTION costs continue to escalate into 2024 with little signs of declining. While hoteliers can't control the construction industry or availability of materials, there are many subtle design decisions that can reduce construction costs. Hoteliers and their design team must use practical approaches and work closely with their contractors from the start of the process. There often is considerable waste in hotel design, leading to less sustainable structures. Here are six considerations hoteliers should take into account when initiating their next design-based undertaking.

I

#### SITE PLANNING

One of the most important steps in the process is to start with efficient site-planning principles. Designers should analyze strategies to allow for the existing topography to eliminate the need to import or export dirt. A balanced site can save hundreds of thousands of dollars in construction costs. Design the parking efficiently to minimize the amount of asphalt necessary to meet parking demands. "Over/under" parking structures are an economical strategy to obtain more parking without the use of ramps and elevators.

#### STRUCTURAL SYSTEMS

Selecting the most economical structural system is the second most important strategy. This will take input from a local contractor. The contractor will analyze three or four appropriate structural systems and assist with finalizing this decision, based on current costs of concrete and steel and the expertise of the local subcontractor market. Once the construction system is selected, the design team should allow for the optimum structural bays to minimize wasted construction materials.

3

#### HOTEL HEIGHTS

Designing the hotel in a straightforward manner will assist with cost savings. While "ins and outs" create character to the hotel, this adds additional labor and exterior wall surface. The floor-to-floor heights should be carefully analyzed to provide the necessary ceiling heights in each area, while maintaining the minimum clearances for utilities and mechanical equipment. A reduction of 8" in each floor-to-floor height will result in many feet of reduced building height and provide savings to the exterior skin, elevators, stairs, interior wall finishes and, air conditioning loads.



## 4

**OPEN SPACES**

Dramatic open spaces often are desired by the interior designers in lobbies and public spaces. Consider adding columns to shorten long spans of concrete and steel. This will allow shallower beams, giving additional space to utilities and reducing overall volume of the hotel. The columns can become an architectural feature in the lobbies, helping to add character and define circulation patterns.

## 5

**INTENTIONAL PM&E**

Plumbing, mechanical, and electrical systems require costly rated horizontal and vertical pathways. Toilet exhausts and fresh air provisions require these costly pathways. The ducts can be collected horizontally and run vertically in just a few rated shafts. Intentional design of the ductwork can avoid costly smoke and fire dampers. Locate mechanical units in ceilings above back-of-house areas, such as toilets and storage areas, to avoid having to needlessly raise ceilings in the public areas.

Plumbing materials should be analyzed and evaluated. Specify PVC piping where appropriate and allowed by codes to avoid large amounts of cast iron pipe. Slope roofs to an exterior wall vs. locating roof drains in the middle of the roof. This allows for the overflow drain requirement to utilize an exterior scupper that eliminates the secondary leader being routed back through the hotel. Encourage the interior designers to group plumbing fixtures in the guestrooms on the same wall and in close proximity. Remote sinks in the guestroom bathrooms unnecessarily adds to the construction costs. Plan for all toilet fixtures to be back-to-back where feasible.

Analyze electrical needs for each area of the hotel. Minimize the amount of receptacles in each area. Provide economical 2x4

fixtures or strip light fixtures in back-of-house areas. Don't over illuminate above code or industry recommended lighting levels. Avoid ceilings in utility and storage areas.

## 6

**GUEST ROOM DESIGN**

Guest room design is very important as guests spend the majority of their stay in this area. Many considerations in the guest rooms can escalate construction costs, as each decision is multiplied by the number of guest rooms planned. The buildable area in a guestroom can be reduced as well as ceiling heights. Reduce the number of receptacles, electrical circuits, and sprinkler heads to the amount necessary to meet codes and to ensure a comfortable guest experience. Provide creative design in the bathroom area by eliminating extra walls and doors that often clutter these areas while adding unnecessary construction costs.

In the current economic environment, it's the small, intentional decisions that can lead to significant construction cost savings. Efficient design reduces overall hotel

square footage and volume and creates a more environmentally friendly building. It's paramount for the entire design team and consultants to work closely with the ownership group from the beginning of the design process. Set goals for projected areas, heights, back-of-house needs, and public amenities. Pay attention to efficiencies and understand where each dollar is spent. ■



*Stephen Overcash is managing principal for ODA Architecture. He can be reached at (704) 905-0423 or [sovercash@oda.us.com](mailto:sovercash@oda.us.com). ODA Architecture, established in*

*1984 has provided architectural expertise to clients for more than 38 years in Charlotte, N.C., and throughout the eastern United States. ODA's foundation is built on a collaborative and entrepreneurial environment that puts the client first to produce an outstanding experience and FUNomenal Design.*

# Decisions make the difference

## Prioritizing value and operational efficiency in new tech investments

by MIKE GRAY

**INVESTING IN NEW TECHNOLOGY** can feel overwhelming. Too often, a desired upgrade in one area – faster Wi-Fi or new property management software (PMS) – can render other infrastructure or software obsolete due to incompatibilities. In addition, many select-service hotels put off upgrading their internet and telecoms systems to avoid capital expenditures.

This can have a detrimental impact on guest experience and loyalty. According to Hospitality Technology's 2023 Customer Engagement Technology Study, 92% of travelers expect reliable and secure Wi-Fi when staying at a hotel, and nearly three out of four say they're more likely to return to hotels (or those operating under the same brand) when their technology expectations have been met. When they haven't, they're more likely to go elsewhere the next time they travel.

Lagging technology also negatively impacts operations. Being unable to use

the latest solutions to streamline processes means properties already short-staffed can see their service level – and their business – suffer. Guests expect a seamless experience, and clunky internet or outdated technology gives your property an antiquated reputation.

Cybersecurity also can be a concern with older technology. Legacy systems become obsolete, which means software patches aren't up to date. Without a proper firewall segregating guest traffic from operations/administration, customer data (including credit cards) could be at risk.

### MAKE A PLAN

Historically, one of the biggest reasons property owners are slow to upgrade their technology is their piecemeal approach. Hoteliers often run a hodgepodge of routers, gateways, security software, bandwidth provisioning, telephony solutions, and platforms, all as separate solutions. That means managing and paying for

multiple vendors, maintenance agreements, and licensing fees. When one system needs an upgrade, it requires unexpected upgrades to others because of incompatibility, which means the costs quickly snowball. It's easy to see why many properties are happy to "leave well-enough alone."

Another challenge is that many hoteliers must also work within brand parameters that dictate specific vendors, products, or minimum technical specifications. Fortunately, many brands are expanding their options, giving operators greater choice with hardware brands and products that are compliant to standards and are much more affordable.

Even if you have a bottomless budget – or you've waited so long to upgrade that you're willing to spend whatever it takes – here are five factors that can help you get the most value and operational efficiency out of your next technology investment.



1

**FORWARD-THINKING**

A lower budget doesn't have to mean lower tech. Look for vendors with the ability, motivation, and capability to add new products and solutions to their portfolio. Bigger isn't always better. Surprisingly, some of the well-known, entrenched vendors are slowest to update because their size and market presence makes them think they can set the pace of innovation. But that can keep hoteliers stuck with old technology. Instead, be sure the vendor you choose has a willingness to adapt and modernize as evidenced by a history of innovation and a robust product roadmap. Lastly, supply chain delays are still a concern, so keep this in mind when discussing available/in-stock inventory and timelines for delivery and installation.



2

**COMPATIBLE SOLUTIONS**

These days, guests expect a wide range of technology, like TV casting, check-in kiosks, mobile services, and in-room digital assistants. You need infrastructure that's compatible with these options, allowing you to expand services without adding complexity. One option is to consolidate technology that used to be separate, siloed systems onto a single-solution platform to simplify management and lower overhead costs. Not only are there fewer licenses and service contracts to manage, but solutions that combine Wi-Fi delivery, bandwidth allocation, security/compliance, and telephony also can provide insights into how your guests utilize these services to help inform future investments.



3

**LOCAL VS. NATIONAL PARTNER**

For a single hotel, local partners often are a better option when it comes to service. For example, if you're entrenched with a big name provider but located in a rural area and something goes wrong, prepare to wait. Tech support can only do so much through remote access – and that's assuming they can remotely access your systems to begin with. Otherwise, you could wait days for support staff to make their way to your property for service; especially for select-service properties that are very often DIY when it comes to technology, having a local partner is invaluable. However, the opposite may be true when working across numerous properties in different locations. The bottom line: Choose a partner you trust who can source compliant solutions that are a just-right fit for your needs and your budget.



### PLAN FOR BACKUP

Some hoteliers may worry that consolidated solutions could introduce the risk of a single-point failure that brings down the whole system. But having a variety of solutions isn't foolproof either. Outages happen. It can be a fault inside the property, or a car hitting a pole down the street that knocks out your internet service. Regardless of whether you're running a piecemeal or a single-vendor solution, you always should ensure you and the vendor have contingency plans in place. Sometimes those plans cost extra – like paying for backup 4G service, for example. But the overall savings from an integrated solution can more than make up for it.



### RULES-BASED SECURITY

Some hotel brands have security requirements that many hoteliers assume require expensive, big-brand-name enterprise security solutions. But these can be expensive and overly complex for select-service properties. You may not need such complicated protection. Instead, a rules-based firewall can be a just-right fit. These offer protection for administrative solutions that's compliant with brand standards by segregating operational technology from guest access, providing a more conservative and affordable security solution where it's needed most.

Today's technology can do more with less, and value and efficiency should be a priority in any tech strategy. Most connectivity solutions should be upgraded about every three years, but many hoteliers wait until it's dire before making the investment, and that puts select properties at a disadvantage.

If it's time for an upgrade at your property, shop around. You might find that brand standards give you more flexibility than you realize. Of course, if you have a good vendor, stick with them; the grass isn't always greener just because it's cheaper. But it's worth the time and effort to investigate different solutions to get a better value, increased operational efficiency and upgradable options to future-proof your investment. ■

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*Mike Gray is the global vice president of strategic partnerships, with Nomadix, an AAHOA Allied Member company, where he focuses on building deeper relationships*

*and specialized programs for hospitality brands, management companies, and ownership groups around the globe.*

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# Keep it simple

No-code automation's role in speeding innovation and enhancing the guest experience

by STEPHAN WIESENER

**“T**O AUTOMATE or not to automate?” is the question most hoteliers have found themselves asking at some point during the past couple of years.

It's a fair question – one the entire industry has grappled with as guest preferences shift from traditional hospitality to self-service experiences. The conventional response to this shift has involved the adoption of all-in-one property management systems, but a growing pool of hoteliers are realizing the limitations of the one-stop shop. In a landscape where guests expect hyper-personalized experiences and technology evolves at lightning speed, hoteliers need workflows and processes that are more nimble and customizable than all-in-one systems.

Enter the next frontier of the automation journey: no-code automation tools that smaller brands with less in-house technology capability are already leveraging, and big brands are beginning to adopt.

## GO WITH THE FLOW

Using no-code automation, new-age hoteliers are streamlining product development in-house without the need to hire programmers to write complex code for every task. This essentially means hoteliers are stepping away from clunky built-in integrations between different software systems, and instead designing workflows visually, using drag-and-drop interfaces and pre-built triggers and actions.

Open APIs make this possible. Think of them as bridges, connecting a chosen no-code platform with a vast ecosystem of

specialized apps and services holding vast amounts of relevant hotel data.

A guest books a room, for example, and specifies the booking is a romantic getaway. The booking then triggers the workflow to automatically send a personalized welcome message via WhatsApp. The workflow also knows to send a confirmation email with a romantic playlist curated for the room's Bluetooth speaker, via Gmail.

All this is possible in the self-service playground of no-code but would have previously been a lengthy project requiring tech-savvy coders to connect the dots and ensure the seamless integration of various apps. Hoteliers are in the driver's seat, building and customizing automations with drag-and-drop ease. And the industry is quickly catching on to the potential that no-code automation offers.

## SKY'S THE LIMIT

Think of the untapped potential beyond the usual suspects like bookings and guest communication. A birthday notifier searches all reservations and checks if the date of birth in a guests' profile matches today's date. Once a match is identified, an email is sent to the front desk and the team can act accordingly, placing a gift in the room or sending a personalized birthday message.

Behind the scenes, a to-be-inspected workflow is automated. Rooms that have been clean and unoccupied for 10 days or more automatically set to the status as “to be inspected,” and housekeeping is notified to check the room again. Processes are more efficient than ever, all achieved with minimum effort.

What no-code automation really unlocks for hotels is the freedom to test, learn, and refine in a way they're not used to. It's a plug-in-and-play setup; hotel teams can set up a workflow, automate it, and then test it out immediately. If something isn't quite right, it can be adapted in minutes. What hoteliers are then left with is a continuous enhancement of operations and services.

Brands of all sizes are adopting the DIY hotelier approach and automating processes in-house to provide unique guest experiences, while simultaneously streamlining manual and tedious back-of-house operations like night audits. The emergence of no-code automation can be seen in all swim lanes, from independents to bigger chains.

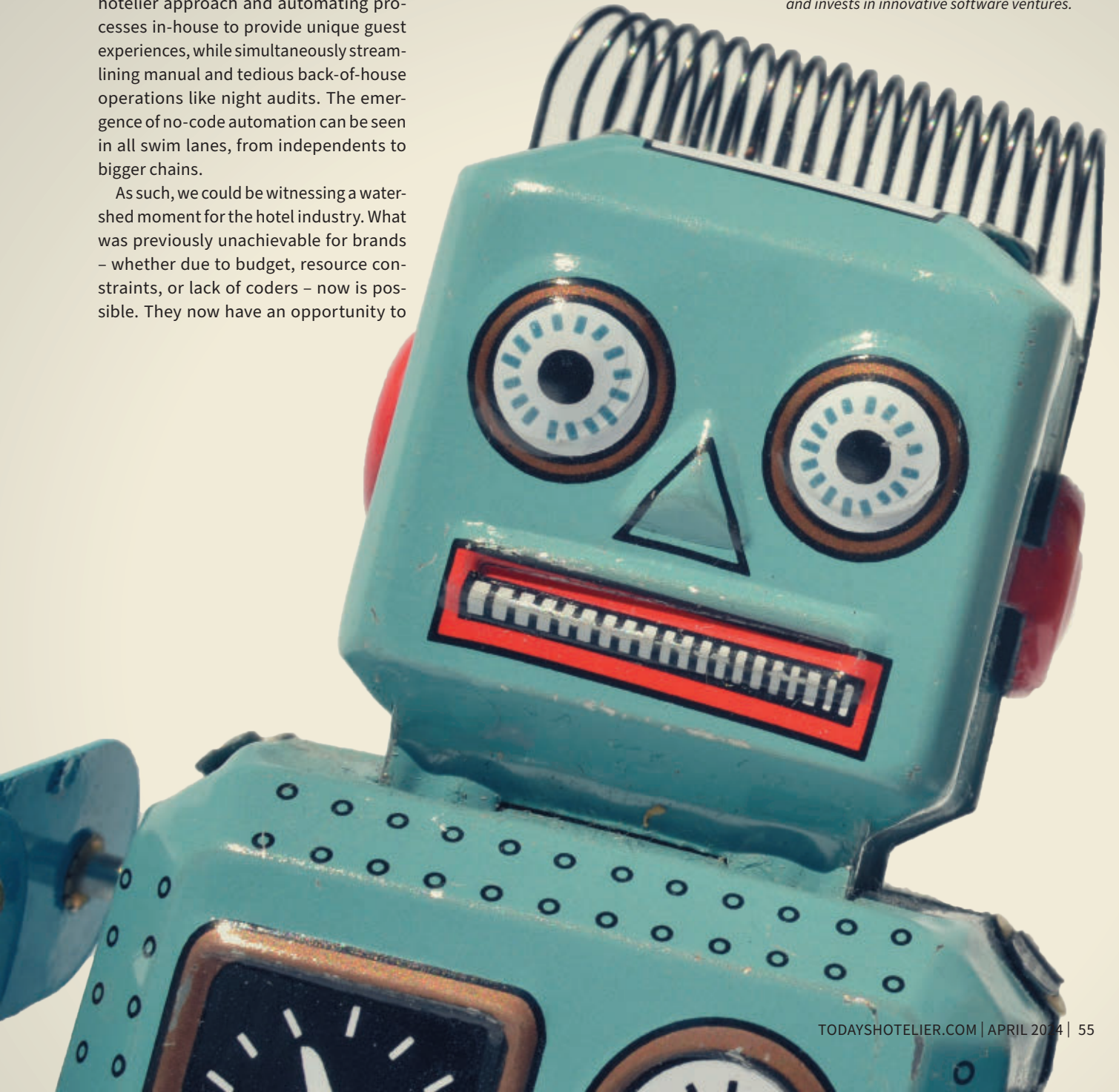
As such, we could be witnessing a watershed moment for the hotel industry. What was previously unachievable for brands – whether due to budget, resource constraints, or lack of coders – now is possible. They now have an opportunity to

really tailor the tech stack and elevate the experience for both guests and employees.

When you think about it, it makes total sense. Given the uniqueness of each property, why would hoteliers remain dependent on the pre-defined functionalities and workflows offered by their software vendor? The era of the cookie-cutter hotel is over with no-code automation opening the floodgates on innovation. ■



*Stephan Wiesener is a serial entrepreneur and platform architect who has founded multiple software companies acquired by Oracle, TripAdvisor, and Shiji. Before co-founding Apaleo, the API-first open hospitality platform, he pioneered the first genuine cloud PMS for hotel chains. With a background in software engineering and a PhD in computer science, Stephan advises startups and invests in innovative software ventures.*



# The reflective perspective

Celebrating the five-year anniversary of AAHOA's first Chairwoman Jagruti Panwala

by JODI SCOTT



**A**S AAHOA CELEBRATES ITS 35th anniversary, 2024 also marks a milestone for one of its members as it was five years ago that Jagruti Panwala took office as the first chairwoman of the association.

Much has changed since that time, including setbacks for the hospitality industry as well as opportunities for growth and development. Panwala has been an active participant in those changes through her role as a hotelier and president of Wealth Protection Strategies and as an AAHOA volunteer leader.

“The hotel industry has definitely evolved during the past five years,” she said. “We’ve seen many challenges to our global economy with the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and wars. We’ve felt and continue to feel the impact that has contributed to major labor shortages, supply chain issues, inflation, and overall unease in international travel.”

Speaking specifically about what she’s observing in the industry, she notes limited, select-service, and extended-stay properties continue to be a good value proposition due to their limited labor requirements. She cautions owners should continue to avoid the over-supplied primary and secondary markets, especially those with stagnant average daily rates. Panwala said new construction is becoming selective so renovation remains important, particularly for properties that must remain competitive but may have put off upgrades during the pandemic.

“As for opportunities, I believe if we continue to stay on top of new trends in travel and technology, a hotel with the right design, the right brand, and the right location with a focus on the customer experience should remain an attractive opportunity no matter the market segment, competition, or unforeseen outside factors,” she said.

**Jagruti Panwala**  
2019-2020 AAHOA Chairwoman

**THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT**

An area of positive change in the past five years was creation of the AAHOA HerOwnership initiative, with the first HerOwnership Conference held in 2022. Panwala had the pleasure of speaking at last year’s HerOwnership event, serving on a panel focused on “Leading with Impact: Harnessing the Power of Executive Presence.” She encourages women in the industry to take advantage of such offerings.

“HerOwnership is a great initiative,” she praised. “Collectively, by working together with so many women leaders and with the talented Women Hotelier Committee members, I have no doubt HerOwnership will continue to provide important tools and opportunities.”

Panwala said the role of women has evolved since she held office and believes there has been much progress. She notes, however, there’s work to be done given that – while 65% of today’s travelers and some 60% of the hotel industry workforce are women – fewer than 20% of executive management positions in hospitality are filled by women.

“Women are still under-represented,” she said. She is heartened to see more women in leadership positions and more diversity in corporate executive positions. She also believes more women will move up the corporate ladder if women continue to advocate for each other, promote and encourage each other to volunteer their time, and mentor future women leaders.

**FIXING THE FUTURE**

Upon reflecting on her areas of focus during her time as chairwoman, Panwala says those same initiatives remain vital to the industry and AAHOA today.

- **Grassroots initiatives:** “We need to focus on energy back to acting locally but thinking globally. That’s why our regional directors and ambassadors are so important.”
- **AAHOA PAC:** “We’re all in this together, and that’s why the AAHOA PAC and advocacy efforts are so important. They’re our insurance policy to fight against bad

laws that negatively affect us. That is why it’s such a passion of mine.”

- **Evolving educational programming:** “One of my primary initiatives was harnessing the power of information to strengthen AAHOA, allowing us to gain a better insight into our members, their needs, and their interests. Helping the association acquire a more complete picture of our footprint in the hospitality industry and expand our reach allowed us to have a more focused and strategic discussion with brands, vendors, and lawmakers. My hope is we continue to place the highest importance on these programs in the future.”

As AAHOA celebrates its anniversary, and as Panwala celebrates the anniversary of her milestone achievement, her hopes and dreams for the future of the association and the industry remain much the same as they were five years ago. These include building and enhancing AAHOA’s relationship with industry leaders and like-minded associations.

“Since AAHOA is the world’s largest hotel owner association, we should be playing a much bigger role informing policymakers about laws that impact our industry before they are introduced,” she said. “AAHOA should be in the room whenever the U.S. economy is being discussed on media outlets and in government buildings across the country. I know it’s easier said than done, but it’s my hope that, in the near future, we collectively broaden the association’s reach to help our members and the hotel industry.” ■

“When I became the first and only AAHOA Chairwoman in [AAHOA’s] 35-year history, I didn’t believe for one second that I happened to be the only qualified woman in three-and-a-half decades. Quite the contrary. It’s my belief and experience that women, in many cases, take the lead in running the family hotel business and are more than qualified to take leadership positions in associations to better our industry.”

– Jagruti Panwala, 2019-2020 AAHOA Chairwoman



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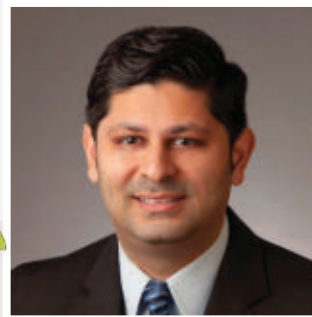
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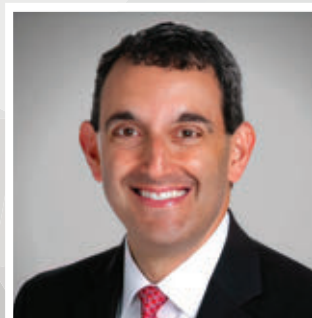


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# Advocacy update

## AAHOA's support of the *LIONS Act*

by TEAM AAHOA

### IN FEBRUARY, CONGRESSMAN

Shri Thanedar (MI-13) announced the introduction of the *Loans In Our Neighborhoods (LIONS) Act*, a bill designed to amend the Small Business Act

by increasing the maximum gross loan amount for section 7(a) loans, from \$5M to \$10M, which would provide greater financial support to small businesses.

This legislation is now being referred to the appropriate House Committee thanks to the leadership of Rep. Thanedar. While the road ahead is long, this is the first of many necessary steps to help hoteliers obtain access to capital, allowing them to operate and thrive in a challenging economy.

### WHY IT MATTERS

Currently, SBA 7(a) and 504 loans are currently capped at \$5M, which was last set in 2010.

For AAHOA Members, during the past decade, the costs of doing business, constructing hotels, and purchasing properties have skyrocketed. In 2024, the value of hotel properties is significantly higher than the current loan limits, leaving substantial collateral for higher loan amounts.

If passed into law, increasing SBA loan limits from \$5M to \$10M has the potential to constitute some of the most impactful legislative measures affecting hoteliers in the foreseeable future.



“AAHOA has persistently advocated for the increase of SBA Section 7(a) loan amounts, which were last established at \$5M nearly 15 years ago. On behalf of AAHOA Members, we have urged lawmakers to raise the SBA loan limits to \$10M to align with the prevailing economic conditions, thereby fostering a sustainable business model for the future. If enacted, this legislation will afford AAHOA Members, as well as entrepreneurs across the U.S., increased opportunities to propel economic growth in virtually every city across the nation.”

– AAHOA President & CEO  
Laura Lee Blake

“...We applaud the introduction of the *LIONS Act*, introduced by Congressman Shri Thanedar. If passed into law, increasing SBA loan limits from \$5M to \$10M has the potential to constitute some of the most impactful legislative measures affecting hoteliers in the foreseeable future.”

– AAHOA Chairman Bharat Patel



“By introducing the *LIONS Act*, we are taking a significant step to bolster the resources available to the small business community in Michigan and across the country. This act is about ensuring that the financial needs of small businesses are adequately met, allowing them to continue driving our economy and creating jobs.”

– Congressman Shri Thanedar (MI-13)



# AAHOA MEMBERS IN ACTION



Arti Patel with various AAHOA Members from her region at the Kansas Capitol for an Advocacy day, hosted by the Kansas Restaurant and Hospitality Association.



Attendees at AAHOA's inaugural HYPE Ownership Conference mingled at a private classic car museum for the "Retro Rendezvous Reception: A Night of Networking Among Classics" event.



AAHOA's first Town Hall of the year, in Myrtle Beach, SC, with more than 100 attendees present.



AAHOA Members and leadership convened in Los Angeles in late January for the latest edition of the Americas Lodging Investment Summit.

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