



## **BEHIND THE SCENES: THE MAKING OF THE MYRTLE BEACH PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY DEBATES**

### **MYRTLE BEACH AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE**

Securing Myrtle Beach as the site of two presidential primary debates can be attributed to the power of partnerships. By collaborating with the local government and businesses, the chamber demonstrated that Myrtle Beach could be a stellar debate locale for the 2008 campaign. The chamber organized the city's pitch: pick Myrtle Beach for the events, and there will be 10,000 hotel rooms available, transportation and financial and other support.

The chamber began its pitch in spring 2007, promoting Myrtle Beach to the South Carolina Republican Party (SCGOP) and Congressional Black Caucus Institute (CBCI) through a briefing booklet, which offered more than 50 pages highlighting local venues, accommodations, attractions, dining, Grand Strand history, photos and more. Officials from both groups then participated on site visits to the Myrtle Beach Convention Center, Palace Theatre, Broadway at the Beach and the Myrtle Beach Marriott at Grande Dunes, as well as tours of Myrtle Beach. In September and October, FOX News and CNN, respectively, conducted site visits and confirmed that the logistics would support their television operations. On the chamber's side, a small group of chamber staff attended the presidential primary debate in Charleston on July 23 to experience the event first-hand.

The SCGOP announced on Aug. 23 that Myrtle Beach had been selected as the host site for the South Carolina Republican Party Presidential Candidates Debate on Jan. 10, just nine days before the "First in the South" Republican primary on Jan. 19. South Carolina Republican Party Chairman Katon Dawson hand delivered letters to the chamber and city of Myrtle Beach, congratulating them for securing the debate. The Myrtle Beach Convention Center was chosen as the debate venue.

The CBCI announced on Oct. 5 that Myrtle Beach would be the site of the January debate. U.S. Rep. James Clyburn, D-Columbia, who is on the board of the CBCI, played an integral role in securing Myrtle Beach as the debate site. The Congressional Black Caucus Institute Democratic Presidential Primary Debate was originally scheduled for Jan. 17 but was rescheduled for Jan. 21 when the South Carolina Democratic Party confirmed the primary for Jan. 26. This will be the last Democratic debate before South Carolina votes on a presidential nominee. The Palace Theatre was chosen as the debate venue.

To assist with the planning and preparation process for the debates, a small group of chamber and city staff visited the debate sites of Charleston (The Citadel), Orangeburg (South Carolina State University) and Columbia (University of South Carolina's Koger Center for the Arts) in November. The representatives met with those responsible for organizing these South Carolina

debates and toured debate venues. In the weeks preceding the debates, a number of chamber employees were assigned to the various debate tasks. By the time of the debates, all chamber staff (approximately 60) will have been involved in the planning, preparation or execution, not the least of which involved responding to between 15,000 and 18,000 phone call and e-mail inquiries (and counting).

**Promotion:** The chamber launched [www.MyrtleBeachPresidentialDebates.com](http://www.MyrtleBeachPresidentialDebates.com) as a portal site for [www.SCGOPMyrtleBeachDebate.com](http://www.SCGOPMyrtleBeachDebate.com) and [www.CBCIMyrtleBeachDebate.com](http://www.CBCIMyrtleBeachDebate.com). To further promote the event, public service announcements are airing via [www.GrandStrandRadio.com](http://www.GrandStrandRadio.com), and billboards welcoming the presidential candidates will be displayed beginning Jan. 4 within city limits.

**Volunteers:** Through StepUP!, a community volunteer network, more than 900 volunteers registered to assist with the debates. Those who complete three hours of training in early January will have the opportunity to serve as community concierges, assemble press kits and welcome bags, place signs, or staff the various special events, among other functions. Chamber employees train and assign volunteers and coordinate the various tasks.

**Transportation (Ground):** Transportation will be provided by motor coaches, sedans/limos (for VIPs), taxi cabs and rental cars during the debates and its activities. The transportation route includes the Myrtle Beach International Airport, debate venues, lodging properties and special event locations.

A unique element of the transportation plan involves training for taxi cab drivers. To be part of the training program, drivers must agree to attend short training sessions beforehand that will offer hospitality tips and orient them to the debates and the special events.

**Transportation (Air):** Through Myrtle Beach Direct Air, the chamber and SCGOP arranged nonstop, discounted chartered air service from New Hampshire on Jan. 9 for journalists who are covering the Myrtle Beach Republican debate.

**Logistics:** The nature of nationally and internationally televised presidential primary debates warrants superior telecommunications and other support: phone lines, Wi-Fi Internet, cable television viewed on large-screen monitors and significant needs for electricity. Organized meals—breakfast, lunch and dinner—are coordinated at the hotels and debate sites. Banners and signs need to be fabricated and displayed at the debate venues and throughout the community. Security needed to be coordinated with numerous entities, including the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SLED) and local law enforcement agencies.

**Media:** To prepare for the 400 to 800 media who are expected to attend, staff provided b-roll and photography of key Myrtle Beach sites and attractions, prepared a 34-page press kit, and assembled and advised local spokespeople. The day of the debates, staff members assist with media check-in/credentialing, the filing center and the spin room.

**Community Concierges:** Immediately before, during and after the debates, welcome desks are set up at the venues and attractions where debate attendees are expected to visit: Myrtle Beach International Airport, Broadway at the Beach, Myrtle Beach Marriott at Grande Dunes, Myrtle Beach Sheraton Convention Center Hotel and shopping areas. Community concierges respond to questions about the Grand Strand and debate activities with a smile and Southern hospitality.

**Mt. Myrtle:** Just before the debates, more than 350 tons of sand are sculpted into heads of the presidential candidates near the debate sites. The sand sculptures brand Myrtle Beach as the debate venue and are intended for visual stand-up spots for media.

**Accommodations:** The media and other debate attendees will be lodged at the Myrtle Beach Marriott at Grande Dunes and Myrtle Beach Sheraton Convention Center Hotel, among other properties throughout the Grand Strand.

**Print Materials:** Those who attend the debates will receive a 40-plus–page special souvenir program booklet that familiarizes out-of-town guests with the Grand Strand, lists the presidential candidates and shares key information about the debate sponsors and partners, as well as includes advertisers.

## **CITY OF MYRTLE BEACH**

The Myrtle Beach City Council actually started the debate discussion in February, when it passed a resolution "encouraging the leaders of the major political parties to consider the greater Myrtle Beach area as a destination for political debates and campaign visits during the 2008 presidential election season."

Councilman Phil Render proposed that resolution, which passed unanimously. The city sent the resolution to party leaders and representatives, both in Columbia and Washington, inviting them to consider Myrtle Beach. Fortunately, the organizers and sponsors for both parties agreed that Myrtle Beach would be a great destination. City Council subsequently pledged the city's resources and staff for the two debates.

The city owns and operates the Myrtle Beach Convention Center, where the staff worked with clients to free dates for debate activities. (The city also owns the Myrtle Beach Sheraton Convention Center Hotel and contracts with a private firm for its operation.) The city has worked closely with party officials, media representatives, the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division and others to plan for and accommodate the debates.

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## **OTHER CONTACTS**

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