

**SALT LAKE**

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**BY JASON STEVENSON**





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# Why Outdoor Retailer and its \$40 million convention may be about to

# TAKE A

# HIKE



BY JASON STEVENSON • [comments@cityweekly.net](mailto:comments@cityweekly.net)

straints are only going to become more pressing. And since Nielsen's contract with the Salt Palace expires in 2014, the trade show's organizers will be deciding by the end of this year whether to remain in Salt Lake City or jump ship to larger cities like Denver, Anaheim, Chicago, Orlando, Chicago or Las Vegas.

## PLAYING A WEAK HAND

When 22,000 Outdoor Retailer attendees fill the Salt Palace on Aug. 2, they'll make this year's Summer Market the 44th-largest trade show in the country. The slightly smaller Winter Market ranks as the 58th-largest show. "To host a large trade show like OR twice a year is unique for Salt Lake," says Scott Beck, president and CEO of Visit Salt Lake, Salt Lake County's convention and tourism bureau. In contrast, the Salt Palace's next two biggest shows—the True Value Market and the Hearth, Patio & Barbecue Expo—attract 10,000 to 15,000 attendees, and both rotate through town once every two to three years.

But perhaps the more important number is OR's \$40 million economic boost to the Salt Lake City economy. That figure comes from regular surveys of participants by the University of Utah's Bureau of Economic & Business Research (BEER). The 2010 survey found that each Summer Market attendee spent almost \$750 during the event, including \$330 on lodging and \$210 on restaurants and food. BEER also calculated that OR supports approximately 285 jobs in the city.

One of those jobs belongs to Greg Bishop, operations manager at Laser Exhibitor Service, a Salt Lake City-based firm that sets up, tears down and stores trade-show booths for OR brands like Mountain Hardwear, Ibis and Columbia. Bishop estimates that the two shows account for 50 percent of Laser's business each year, and that his company hires 100 to 130 contract workers to handle the frenzied week of installations. "We hope OR doesn't leave," Bishop says. "But if they do, we hope to continue to service our clients in the next city. We plan to have a lot of face-to-face conversations with our clients this August."

Scott Beck knows that if OR ditches Utah, replacing the show's \$40 million bump—and jobs like Greg Bishop's—will be tough. As the local point person for retaining the show, his Visit Salt Lake team pitched Nielsen with a new proposal in May 2012 to compete with Denver and four other finalists selected by Nielsen—Anaheim, Orlando, Chicago and Las Vegas. To address the crunch in

## A badge gets you in.

Without it, you're stuck on the sidewalk outside the Salt Palace, gazing up at the glass silos plastered with banners of sleek, spandex-clad athletes. All around you, men and women dressed in the latest micro-fibers and fleece stream through the convention center's mammoth doors. Clutching cups of scalding coffee and shouldering backpacks better suited for navigating trails than city traffic, they cross West Temple's seven lanes with loose, mile-eating strides. As they move, their shimmering synthetic shirts wick away the last drops of sweat from their five-mile "wake up" jog up City Creek Canyon. If it's wintertime, the ones with red cheeks and wide grins probably just returned from a pre-dawn ski run down one of the nearby canyons. And unlike most of us, they hold up their ID badges to pass effortlessly through the glass threshold and into the dazzling commercial spectacle that is Salt Lake City's Outdoor Retailer (OR) Show.

Twice a year, in January and August, tens of thousands of outdoor-industry buyers, manufacturers, retailers and media reps land in Salt Lake City for four days of frenzied show & tell. They transform the Salt Palace into an REI store on steroids, jamming it with new clothing, footwear and high-tech gadgets that mere mortals won't be able to touch for another year.

With its climbing walls, on-mountain demos, and boisterous happy hours, OR might look like a playground for active adults. But it's also a serious trade show, where million-dollar product launches and retail deals are finalized over pints from local microbreweries. Booths for a thousand brands fill every corner of the show floor, and crowds gather so thickly you can't throw a



carabineer without hitting someone who's climbed Mount Everest. For several days each summer and winter, OR essentially takes over downtown Salt Lake City. And while the Salt Palace's cramped quarters lift the show's energy level, the lack of space is a major reason why, after 16 years of calling Utah home, Outdoor Retailer might soon leave town for good.

## UNDER PRESSURE

"I'd love to not argue with the fire marshal every time we have a show in Salt Lake," jokes Kenji Haroutunian, vice president at Nielsen Expositions, the California firm that produces and owns Outdoor Retailer. Except he's not joking. As show director for the past five years, the 51-year-old Haroutunian knows the challenges of squeezing a big-time show like OR inside a medium-size venue like the Salt Palace, and placating the fire marshal is one of them. "Right now, we are jamming the hall with as much exhibit space as we can fit into the box," he says, "and we're already spilling people onto the sidewalks."

In summer 2011, Haroutunian had to turn down exhibitors' requests for 25,000 square feet of additional space, which meant less revenue for the show. "It's starting to become very difficult for anyone new to come to OR," he says.

Attendees also grumble to Haroutunian about too few hotel rooms and overcrowded restaurants, while visitors from the East Coast complain about limited flights. As the economy gains steam and OR continues to grow, Salt Lake City's space con-



exhibit space, Beck proposed a multi-venue show utilizing both the Salt Palace and Sandy's South Towne Exposition Center, which is 16 miles south of downtown but can accommodate an additional 243,000 square feet of exhibit space. The pitch also recommended increasing the scope of the show's outdoor demo days, a chance for attendees to test-drive new gear like kayaks at Park's City's Jordanelle Reservoir in summer, and skis and snowshoes at one of the many local ski resorts in winter.

"The centerpiece of our response is the idea of engaging in a more strategic fashion with our natural environment," Beck says. "We feel those strengths are unique to Salt Lake City in terms of both our accessibility to outdoor venues and our affordability as a destination."

## NO ROOM AT THE INN

Fixing the city's shortage of downtown hotel rooms, however, isn't as easy as spending more time in the mountains. Although Salt Lake City has 8,000 hotel rooms within three miles of the convention center, it can't compete with the 100,000 rooms in downtown Las Vegas or the 22,000 rooms near Orlando's convention center.

Nicole Orr, marketing manager for Danner Footwear in Portland, Ore., says that when her team tried to reserve additional rooms in Salt Lake City for August, they ran into trouble. "We'd been fortunate in the past because we got rooms way in advance, but this year might be the first year we have to take advantage of hotels 20 miles outside of the city," she says.

Beck says Outdoor Retailer does overwhelm the local lodging market, but he doesn't see it as a deal-breaker. "Do I wish I had the hotel inventory of Las Vegas to offer?" he says. "No, that's not Salt

Lake. One of our strengths is that when OR is here, they are the only convention in town, and the city rallies around that concept."

Still, an extra thousand hotel rooms located a stone's throw from the Salt Palace would be helpful, which is why local governments and economic development agencies have been exploring the idea of a convention hotel for the past decade. Along the way, they've accumulated a stack of consultant studies that all say the same thing: Salt Lake City needs a headquarter hotel if it wants to remain competitive in the convention business, especially since Denver built a 1,100-room Hyatt next to its convention center in 2005.

Salt Lake County Councilman Arlyn Bradshaw, who supports the new hotel, believes the region faces a choice. "Do we want to be at the level of a Denver, San Diego or Portland, or do we want to drop down a tier, and compete for the type of events that would go to an Albuquerque or a Boise?"

Leading the charge for a new hotel is the Downtown Alliance, a non-profit with close ties to the Salt Lake Chamber of Commerce. "I hope that a convention-center hotel would sweeten the pot and encourage Outdoor Retailer to consider Salt Lake City into the future," says Jason Mathis, president of the Downtown Alliance. "But with or without OR, a convention hotel is really the right thing to do."

The prospect of a new hotel took another tentative step forward in June when the Salt Lake County Council voted

6-3 to set aside \$25,000 to hire a consultant to survey local municipalities and evaluate funding models.

Critics of the project, like Republican Councilman David Wilde, who voted against the study, want to keep Salt Lake City out of an "arms race" to attract more convention business. Wilde mentions via e-mail that previous expansions of the Salt Palace didn't deliver on promises of additional conventions or spending, and

that the main beneficiary—the Outdoor Retailer show—is threatening to leave anyway. "If [the hotel] is such a great project," he asks, "why won't the private sector build it?"

Mathis says four private companies have registered interest in developing the project, and that government funding would be applied to public infrastructure like street lights, sidewalks and meeting-room space.

Nielsen's Haroutunian is doubtful the hotel will materialize. "The city has made it clear to us that there's just no appetite or ability for them to justify another expansion of the Salt Palace and to build the necessary hotels that would go around it," he says. "The analogy I've heard is that we can't build a church just for Easter Sunday. There's no demand for the rest of the year for anything like that."

## THIS IS THE PLACE

Even if cramped exhibit spaces and limited hotel rooms diminish Salt Lake City's chances to keep Outdoor Retailer, there is one factor that favors it. And for some, it's the most important trait of all: Salt Lake City is a real "outdoors" town. Fans of the city point out that this appeal goes beyond its proximity to the mountains—which

**"The sole thing Salt Lake City really has going for it right now is the perception of embracing outdoor recreation," says Michael Hodgson, an Outdoor Industry Association ombudsman. "If that changes, the culture suddenly becomes less of an influence to stay."**

no other city of comparable size can match—to include the passions of its businesses and residents.

"The city feels like it has a culture of people who appreciate the outdoors," Orr says. "I know individuals who live in Salt Lake who are really into getting the most out of camping, skiing, hiking and cycling, which is why, outside of the logistical challenges, I think it's such a great home for the show." Orr would like the show to stay

in Utah or move to Denver, which she says registers a comparable outdoors vibe. She says larger venue cities like Anaheim or Las Vegas don't support the true spirit of Outdoor Retailer.

"A huge draw for me to attend OR is to come and get some climbing days in and get some skiing days in during the winter show," Haroutunian says. "I think the part of the business equation that happens outside of the hall—at night, in the restaurant, in a night club, on a chair lift or when you're tied into a rope together—is not to be underestimated. That power is the secret to the success of OR."

## ENTER POLITICS

In a June 24 *Denver Post* article, Richard Scharf, Scott Beck's counterpart at Visit Denver, noted that if Denver lands the OR show, it would not only attract tens of thousands of delegates to his city, but might also encourage outdoor-product companies to locate in Denver, just as they have in Utah. According to the Economic Development Corporation of Utah, more than 1,000 sports and outdoor-product companies are based in the state. Many of these firms arrived during the 16 years OR has called Salt Lake City home. The state's business team prominently mentions the show's presence in its brochures.

One of the few Utah outdoors companies that predates OR is Black Diamond, whose CEO, Peter Metcalf, arrived in Salt Lake City in 1991 with a handful of employees. Today, Black Diamond is a \$145 million, publicly traded company that employs 320 people in Utah and more internationally. Over the past two decades, Metcalf has been an active proponent of improving outdoor recreation and land protections in Utah, and he played a key role in luring Outdoor Retailer to Salt Lake in 1996.

In recent years, Metcalf and other vocal members of the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA), the trade group that is title sponsor of the show, have leveraged the economic impact of their indus-

**"The city has made it clear to us that there's just no appetite or ability for them to justify another expansion of the Salt Palace and to build the necessary hotels that would go around it," says Kenji Haroutunian, vice president of Nielsen Expositions, which owns Outdoor Retailer.**







try in Utah to pressure local politicians on issues like wilderness protection and public-lands conservation.

OIA's executive vice president and chief operating officer, Lori Herrera, says the outdoor industry is linked to the natural environment beyond just sales.

"We are in an industry that is driven from the head and heart," Herrera says. "And we know that [politics] is something our board and members care about."

Although the majority of OIA's lobbying occurs at a national level, Herrera says they pay attention to Utah because of OR. OIA has pressured the state's leaders for many years, most recently sending letters to Gov. Gary Herbert criticizing the state's conservation and land-management policies.

Those policies came to the forefront again in March, when Utah legislators passed a law demanding that the federal government turn over 22 million acres of Bureau of Land Management BLM and U.S. Forest Service land to the state to keep, lease or sell, and set aside \$3 million to sue if they don't comply. Most recently, the state announced its decision to sue the feds (again) under an 1866 mining law to take control of 19,000 unused roads, some of which cut across

designated wilderness, prehistoric sites and national parks.

According to Michael Hodgson, an OIA ombudsman, it's logical to think Utah's hostile stance toward public-land protection and recreation access could generate a backlash among the OR exhibitors. "Any business wants to support institutions that are in line with [preservation of wild lands]—it is important to them as a culture," he says. "The sole thing Salt Lake City really has going for it right now is the perception of embracing outdoor recreation. If that changes, the culture suddenly becomes less of an influence to stay."

If conflict between the outdoor industry and Utah's political leaders sounds familiar, it is. Back in May 2003, Metcalf and OIA president Frank Hugelmeyer publicly threatened to pull the show out of Salt Lake City unless then-Gov. Mike Leavitt did more to protect wilderness lands in the state. Earlier that year, Leavitt had removed safeguards from 6 million acres of potential wilderness in Utah, angering the outdoor community and inspiring Metcalf to fire off an op-ed in *The Salt Lake Tribune*, saying, "Leavitt's deals are jeopardizing the health of backcountry recre-

ation destinations and outdoor businesses in Utah."

During the 2003 OR summer market, a compromise-ready Leavitt met with OIA board members and even toured the show floor (after which he was said to be overwhelmed by its size and impact), as both sides reached an agreement to protect more Utah wilderness and keep OR in Salt Lake City through 2005. Just a year later, the show signed a contract to stay in Salt Lake City through 2009 in return for a 145,000-square-foot expansion of the Salt Palace.

## POLITICAL INDIFFERENCE

In a March 2012 op-ed piece in the *Trib* titled "Herbert's Unholy Alliance Hurts Economy," Black Diamond's Peter Metcalf decried the Legislature's move in the 2012 session to reclaim lands from the federal government, saying the governor and state lawmakers were "killing the goose that lays the golden egg."

Metcalf notes the difference this time around is the lack of a two-way conversation between the OIA and Utah's political leaders that resolved the crisis in 2003. "We had the most responsive relationship with Gov. Leavitt and a solid, constructive relationship with Jon Huntsman," says Metcalf. "But our relationship with the current governor and elected officials has never been worse." He accuses Utah's current leaders of failing to honor the commitments reached with the previous administrations. "The fact is that this state is associated with some of the worst policies regarding federal land in the country," Metcalf says.

Herbert believes that the development Utah's natural resources like oil, gas and coal is vital for the state's economy and is not mutually exclusive with protecting the environment. "Gov. Herbert has repeatedly stated that opportunities for outdoor recreation are important to Utah's economy and quality of life, and are a key consideration in every public-lands policy discussion," says Ally Isom, the governor's deputy chief of staff. "The governor's office of economic development is actively working with the outdoor industry, and the governor's environmental adviser, Alan Matheson, is actively engaged in dialogue with the OR show to discuss and address their specific needs to ensure they remain in Utah as a valued partner."

But more dialogue with the OR show isn't enough for Metcalf, who, two weeks ago, resigned from the Utah Ski & Snowsports Industry working group. Metcalf called recent actions by Utah's legislature and Herbert as "hostile to the interests of the outdoor industry" as well



### Outdoor Retailer Wish List

	Ideal Location	Salt Lake City	Denver	Las Vegas	Orlando	Anaheim	Chicago
Exhibit Space (gsf)	900,000	510,600	584,000	650,000	987,000	813,000	2,600,000
Other Space (gsf)	1,200,000	160,000	185,000	400,000	1,000,000	120,000	600,000
Union Controlled	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Airport Proximity	5 miles	8 miles	25 miles	4 miles	15 miles	11 miles	23 miles
Hotel rooms within walking distance	10,000	5,200	6,500	9,266	3,500	4,500	3,500
Hotel rooms within 3 miles	20,000	8,000	8,200	100,000	22,000	5,000	10,000
Average room night cost (\$)	\$120	\$101	\$158	\$97	\$146	\$142	\$139
Average flight cost (\$)	\$300	\$323	\$265	\$207	\$406	\$264	\$210
Restaurant variety/proximity	400	140	300	1000	80	500	800

Source: Outdoor Industry Association/City Weekly



as "reactionary and contrary to the state's long-term economic benefit." It later was reported in the *Trib* that Herbert, angered by Metcalf's op-ed, had asked him to resign from the working group if he "cannot work in a spirit of collaboration."

## HANGING IN THE BALANCE

But, to the greater OR community, all of this political bickering may look like a Utah family feud. Danner Footwear's Nicole Orr has been attending OR for three years. She says she's out of the loop on Utah politics, but she also doesn't think it matters. "When it comes to decisions about the future of OR, I feel it's better to do the right thing for members of OIA, and do the right thing for the folks who actually attend the show," she says.

Visit Salt Lake's Scott Beck doesn't see Utah's land politics as a barrier to retaining OR. "We are very focused around the business opportunities and business environment for a trade show, and I don't think politics will impact the discussion and the decision," he says.

In fact, Beck thinks Utah's environmental legacy gives the state a leg up on its competition. "We have a really good track record in Utah and are clearly light-years ahead of other states in our stewardship with the natural environment." After mentioning the Salt Palace's 1.65-megawatt rooftop solar array and the new airport TRAX line, scheduled to open in 2013, Beck says, "The average outdoor attendee is much more concerned with solar panels, public transportation and recycling than these other [political] discussions."

Beck's business-focused approach mirrors the thinking of Nielsen's Haroutunian, who has a key vote in determining if OR stays or goes. "At Nielsen, we don't really make decisions on venues for events based on politics," he says. "We make decisions based on what the industry tells us what they want, what they need. At the end of the day, we want OR to be about the business. We want people from all sides of political spectrum to feel free to come into OR and not feel ostracized and not be treated differently because they have a political lean one way or another."

If politics does enter the debate, Garry Carlson would like everyone to become more educated about the issues. Carlson is a Salt Lake Valley resident and buyer at Overstock.com who attends a dozen trade shows a year, including OR. He's been following the public-lands debates in Utah and believes that outsiders lack a nuanced understanding of the situation. "If there are particular lands that need to be protected, let's protect them," he says. "But if some of the areas where we want the state to have control are vast wastelands of desert, then we could pull more resources from them or make them multi-use."

In the end, Metcalf admits the boycott threat he used to leverage concessions from Gov. Leavitt in 2003 hasn't worked in the long run. "There is a new realization that if the show is staying here [in Utah] as an attempt to influence public policy, it's not working," he says. "How could it be any worse? If this is the best we can do, we all should go home."

But Mark Rasmussen, senior vice president at the Clearfield-based climbing-gear company Petzl America, Inc., disagrees. He foresees major challenges for Utah's outdoor-recreation lobby if Outdoor Retailer stops coming here. "If Salt Lake City solves the logistic issues and the show stays, the political issues in Utah would continue to be worked on," he says. "But if the show leaves, I think the biggest loss will be Salt Lake's position as a bully

"We had the most responsive relationship with Gov. Leavitt, and a solid, constructive relationship with Jon-Huntsman" explains Black Diamond CEO Peter Metcalf. "But our relationship with the current governor and elected officials has never been worse."

pulpit to protect the outdoor community." Rasmussen believes the biggest drawback of OR's departure will be felt by the hikers, climbers, skiers and outdoor companies like Petzl and Black Diamond that call Utah home.

## DECISION TIME

Since all the proposals have been received from cities vying for the convention, the ball is in Nielsen's court. There's not much state or local government can do now to convince OR to decide to stay, unless they can wave a magic wand to double the size of the Salt Palace overnight. However, the OIA board of directors will meet with Gov. Herbert and his chief of staff on Aug. 1, the day before OR opens, to discuss the industry's concerns over the state's public-land policies.

OIA hasn't planned any specific events at the show regarding the pending decision, according to Lori Herrera, but they will continue to gather feedback through online forums and surveys. Asked when the final decision will be made, Herrera suggests it will be this year.

"The window for us to be looking at what comes after 2014 is closing," she says. "To move a trade show of this size takes time, so we're really hoping that, coming into this fall, we have a clear path on which venue it will be."

But a firm decision by fall of 2012 seems premature to Haroutunian, who reiterates that his employer, Nielsen, owns the show and gets to make the final call. "We'll have a good idea by then, but I doubt there will be any real consensus, like '70 percent say go to Denver,'" he says. "That's very unlikely." In addition, Haroutunian says that the entire decision process can be extended. "We don't have to sign another five-year agreement with a location. Instead, we can sign for one year to give us another window because we still want to continue the conversation."

There's also one more factor that Haroutunian's considering as he approaches a decision—the risk of moving a successful show. "One of my big concerns is that if we move, we move for the right reasons," he says. If OR splits for Las Vegas or Anaheim, there's a chance that a rival outdoor show could spring up to reclaim its mantle in Salt Lake City.

The second scenario isn't far-fetched. When limited space at the Indianapolis convention center forced the Performance Racing Industry (PRI) show to jump to Orlando in 2005, the unexpected move angered some long-time exhibitors. By 2009, a rival show calling itself the International Motorsports Industry Show (IMIS) that focused on the industry's core appeal had returned to Indianapolis and signed a long-term deal with the city's convention center, causing an ongoing rift in the racing-sports world.

If somehow Salt Lake City comes out on top and Outdoor Retailer stays in Utah, we'll never know if that scenario would come to pass. But as tens of thousands of outdoor aficionados overwhelm the Salt Palace next week and spill into the surrounding sidewalks and streets, the odds-makers in Vegas will probably increase their bets against Salt Lake City. **CW**

Jason Stevenson is a Salt Lake City freelance writer and a former editor at Backpacker and Outside magazines. He also works as a freelancer for SNEWS, an outdoor-industry news source, reporting for the Outdoor Retailer Daily, the newspaper published each day during the OR show.

"We don't really make decisions on venues for events based on politics," says Kenji Haroutunian. "We make decisions based on what the industry tells us what they want, what they need. At the end of the day, we want OR to be about the business."



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