

## Measure to invest \$2B into George R. Brown Convention Center area signed into law

*Jun 21, 2023, 7:00am CDT*

The George R. Brown Convention Center and the surrounding area downtown could soon receive a big facelift thanks to a bipartisan measure signed into law June 19.

Gov. [Greg Abbott](#)'s signature on Senate Bill 1057 will allow the city and Houston First Corp., the organization charged with promoting the city's convention and tourism industries, to receive a portion of the hotel-occupancy taxes in excess of the amount collected this year for the next 30 years.

Under S.B. 1057, the revenue collected will allow for improvements to the George R. Brown Convention Center and the surrounding area, which could include the East Downtown area. The state comptroller's office estimates the revenue will exceed \$1.8 billion over the next three decades.

"The passage of this legislation will have an enormous impact on Houston remaining a tier-one convention and major event destination, really for decades to come," Houston First President and CEO [Michael Heckman](#) said in an interview. "It will modernize and enhance our convention center and our convention district in ways that are important not only to Houstonian leisure visitors but also convention attendees. It's important that Houston remain not only at par with our competitors across the country, but to stay a step ahead of the competition. This legislation will allow us to do that."

S.B. 1057 is essentially an amendment to a 2013 law that provided Dallas and Fort Worth with similar incremental revenue from hotel-occupancy taxes. Under the new legislation, Houston will now benefit.

"The great thing is that Houston will receive the same benefits without having to raise new taxes," Heckman said. "All of the revenue that will now come to the city will come from taxes that are already in place."

The bipartisan bill was authored by state Sen. [John Whitmire](#), a Houston Democrat, and was sponsored in the Texas House by state Reps. [Sam Harless](#), a Republican, and [Shawn Thierry](#), a Democrat. Both Harless and Thierry are from the Houston area.

The law allows the incremental revenue to be used not just for improvements to the George R. Brown Convention Center but also for the potential development of new hotels and venues within the convention district.

Heckman said Houston First and city officials have not yet decided how the new revenue will be used. However, he said his organization will begin creating a vision for the convention district later this year.

From there, Houston First will start planning for how to develop that vision in phases over the coming years.

“The process will be very data driven and will include input from all of our stakeholders,” Heckman said. “We want to build the kind of convention district that really allows us to do a lot more than even what we’re able to do today. This is an economic development in our city that we will benefit from for decades.”

Heckman noted that major cities across the country are pouring money into their convention districts in the hope of landing new business meetings, trade shows and events — and all the money that comes with them.

Just last year, for example, the Dallas City Council approved \$4 billion to tear down and rebuild the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center. Much of the funding for that project is coming from state and local hotel-occupancy taxes.

In Houston, meanwhile, the George R. Brown Convention Center is 36 years old, having opened in 1987.

Being able to breathe new life into the building and the surrounding area will allow Houston to better compete for major conventions and trade shows, Heckman said.

Even before the passage of S.B. 1057, Houston was more than holding its own in bringing major business events to the city.

The Bayou City has already scheduled 30 citywide meetings for 2023 — two more than it had in 2019, before the pandemic took hold.

Those meetings are expected to have an economic impact of \$265.5 million. That’s up from the estimated \$257.5 million economic impact the 28 citywide meetings had in 2019, according to Houston First.

Earlier this month, Houston [was selected to host the Professional Convention Management Association’s annual conference in 2025](#), which is expected to bring between 3,000 to 4,000 industry professionals to the city.

Houston First said having thousands of professionals who specialize in managing large-scale business events, conferences and conventions descending on the city could reap additional benefits in the years to come.

“The conference also provides an exceptional opportunity for Houston’s hotels, restaurants, attractions, entertainment, retail and more to showcase all the city has to key decision-makers in the meetings industry,” the organization said.

Also this month, organizers unveiled plans for [a new annual conference in Houston focused on sports technology and innovation.](#)

The conference — named Pokatok — will be held April 4-7, 2024, at the George R. Brown Convention Center, Discovery Green and various hotels and venues downtown.

Pokatok will revolve around the theme of sports technology, which includes everything from esports and how audiences view sports to the ways athletes prepare and perform and how venues host sporting events, said [Lawson Gow](#), founder of Houston-based Gow Cos. and co-founder of Pokatok.