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## **Florence Civic Center Celebrates Increases**

During the past three years, the Civic Center Commission and its managing partner SMG have made great strides in establishing Florence as a favored destination for religious and educational conferences, national family shows and sporting events. In 2006, the Florence Civic Center had notable increases in all of the event areas. A number of capital improvements have been accomplished and marketing efforts have been revved up with a new newsletter program and web site materials.

Gross revenues increased by 20% over the previous year to \$2,508,220. Attendance increased by 7% and gross ticket sales were up an impressive 47%. Also, the facility operating loss continued its downward trend with a nearly 30% decrease over the past three years.

The SMG managed facility is the largest entertainment and convention venue in northeastern South Carolina and is home to the Florence Symphony Orchestra, the Pee Dee Cyclones hockey team, the Florence Phantoms indoor football team and the Florence Hall of Fame.

The civic center, built in 1993, has emerged as a cornerstone of a rapidly growing area adjacent to I-20 and I-95. During the past year, this area has seen the opening of a new Hilton Garden Inn, Holiday Inn Express, Spring Hill Suites, Home Depot, Kohl's, Olive Garden and Longhorn Steakhouse. Chili's Restaurant, Indigo Joe's Sports Bar and the Arbor One Center will be opening in 2007 and plans are underway for a new Veterans Memorial Park located next to the civic center's parking lot.

Capital improvements are also continuing to keep abreast of business growth. Over the past four years, SMG has contributed \$350,000 in matching capital funds with the City and County Councils. New carpeting has been installed in all suites and offices, and the promoter's office, and the sports locker rooms have been refurbished. The arena's in-line concession stands have been completely redesigned and remodeled and a new pizza concession added. New portable concession stands, including beverage stations, have been placed on the arena concourse and in the VIP Club areas. Major upgrades in the main kitchen area have been made with the addition of new equipment, including a new "grill stove."

Rene Josey, Chairman of the Florence Civic Center Commission, explained, "We value our partnership with SMG and it has created a win-win situation. Last year, in conjunction with SMG, we developed a strategic plan for the facility. This plan provides both groups with a common goal and gives the facility a direction for future growth. Another important segment of the facility's recent success has been greater management stability." Josey added, "In June of 2006, SMG was rewarded with a contract extension through June 2009. We have worked hard to keep a good management team in place."

Kendall Wall, SMG general manager, explained, “One of the things we’ve emphasized was to recruit nationally known family shows and to diversify our event calendar. During the past fifteen months, we’ve hosted Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus, Disney On Ice, SEBRA Bull Riding Finals, Arena Cross & Monster Truck Show, WWE Wrestling (TV taping), “Madea Goes To Jail” Gospel Play and Sesame Street Live.”

“Additionally for 2006, our sales team recruited eight state conventions with an attendance of more than 64,000, generating a rollover economic impact of over \$21 million. New conventions and special events coming in 2007 will be the United Methodist State Convention, the AME Youth Conference and the AIFA All-Star and Championship Game all in June, a major worldwide conference with Honda in October and the Southern Baptist Convention and Disney On Ice both in November.

The increase in revenue coincides with accelerated marketing efforts. The civic center’s web site has been completely revamped to include detailed information for promoters, meeting planners and patrons. The “In the Flo” e-mail club has more than 5,000 members that get first information on all upcoming events. A monthly newsletter goes out to 20,000 consumers. A new brochure targeting meeting planners was produced and used in a direct mail campaign to associations and meeting professionals throughout the state and the southeast. The brochure features graphics from the civic center’s advertising campaign and expanded information on *Catering By SMG*, the center’s in-house food service, as well as detailed facility floor plans. Additionally, new computerized lobby and outside marquees promote upcoming events.

In next year’s budget beginning July 1, the Civic Center Commission will request funds for remodeling the 15,000 square foot exhibit hall, adding carpeting to create a new ballroom. “This is a very critical step in the facility’s future.” Wall explained, “With competition for events so strong in the Carolinas, you have to be willing to upgrade your facility. We are fortunate to have great support from members of the City and County Councils.”

The multi-time Prime Site Award winning Florence Civic Center is a creatively designed facility making it ideal for a variety of uses. It features a 30,000-square foot, 10,000- seat arena with adjoining 15,000-square foot exhibit hall and three well-appointed meeting rooms offering 5,000 + square feet. The building offers high-speed Internet service throughout. The center has an optimal location at the intersection of I-95 and I-20 and there are five national chain hotels within walking distance, plus two major shopping malls and numerous restaurants.