

Location, Location, and Location!

I have been reading the results and comments from our Annual Meeting Task Force's survey. Not surprisingly, and consistent with comments we get each year on our annual meeting evaluation, the location of the meeting is a topic of intense interest. I can understand why realtors have made famous that quote that the three most important qualities of real estate are location, location, and location!

Many of you obviously loved Hawaii, but others said that it is too far and too expensive. I can easily understand both opinions. We have asked various questions about the meeting location on surveys in 1999, 2004, 2006 and every year on our meeting evaluation. I think that I can safely summarize the consensus opinion of our members on this question: We all want the meeting to be in a 4 or 5 star hotel, on the beach, in a warm location, that is inexpensive, and that has a direct flight of less than 2 hours from my home. Simple, right?

Let me share some of the requirements we have in selecting a meeting location and hotel. This may surprise you, but the most critical requirement for us is adequate meeting space. We can make up for a shortage of sleeping rooms by using overflow hotels, even though ideally everyone would like to be in the main hotel; however, it is not an option to hold some of our sessions in a different location down the street. Adequate meeting space is a deal point for us as we look at potential locations. We need a large ballroom that will seat at least 1,000 people (and preferably more) for our plenary sessions, breakout rooms for seven concurrent panel sessions, adequate poster space, some small meeting rooms for various committees and other small meetings, and an adequate space for serving meals. The Waikoloa Village and the Fontainebleau in Miami have just barely enough meeting space to accommodate us, but with literally no room to spare and no room for the meeting to expand in total size or from its current configuration of sessions. The Boca Raton Resort and Club also has adequate meeting space, but the best, most generous meeting space in any of the hotels we have used recently is at the Westin Diplomat. We actually could add some extra sessions if necessary when we are meeting there.

An adequate number of sleeping rooms is another critically important requirement for us. At the Hawaii meeting we used 1,183 rooms in our contracted room blocks on our peak nights. Of course, some people also booked their own rooms in condos or hotels outside of our room block. In 2010, we used 1,239 rooms on our peak nights. Very few hotels have that many sleeping rooms and, of the ones that do, most are located downtown in major cities. Hotels that have anything close to that number of rooms *and* that are located in warm, beachside locations are very rare. Because it is inevitable that we will need to use an overflow hotel for additional sleeping rooms, the quality of and distance to suitable overflow hotels is another variable we consider when looking at potential sites. The Fontainebleau in Miami has more sleeping rooms than other hotels we have used, but a close second is the Westin Diplomat. The Diplomat also has the advantage of an adequate overflow hotel just across the street. The Boca Raton Resort and Club does not have an adequate number of rooms and the overflow hotels all involve a car ride of 20 minutes or more.

Of course, the climate of the meeting location is also an important concern, especially since our meeting is in early December. Who wants to go to some freezing Northern or Mid-western city for a meeting!? Since we can no longer fit into the meeting space at the Caribe Hilton, there are no hotels that are large enough to accommodate us in the Caribbean, which is the only location that could guarantee us warm weather. And, Council decided after the Acapulco meeting in 1999 that we would not hold our meetings outside of the U.S. or one of its territories. This leaves us with South Florida on the East Coast and California or Arizona in the West if we want to have the best chance for warm weather and want to stay on the U.S. mainland. Hawaii is another possibility, but distance and expense makes it an option for only occasional use at best.

So, when all the requirements above are factored in, there are only a very few hotels that can accommodate our meeting. We will be looking at those options in the coming months and making recommendations to Council later this year for the 2017 meeting. Once we identify a location that is suitable, we will then work to negotiate the best financial deal we can, both for the College and for the attendees.

Selecting and securing the best location for the annual meeting is not an easy task, and we know that we will never make everyone happy. We want you to know, however, that we do listen to your concerns, your complaints, and your suggestions. We take those into consideration as we do our site selection. And finally, we let form follow function; i.e. we do our best to find a site that best fits the scientific program as well as accommodates, as much as possible, the wishes of our members and attendees.