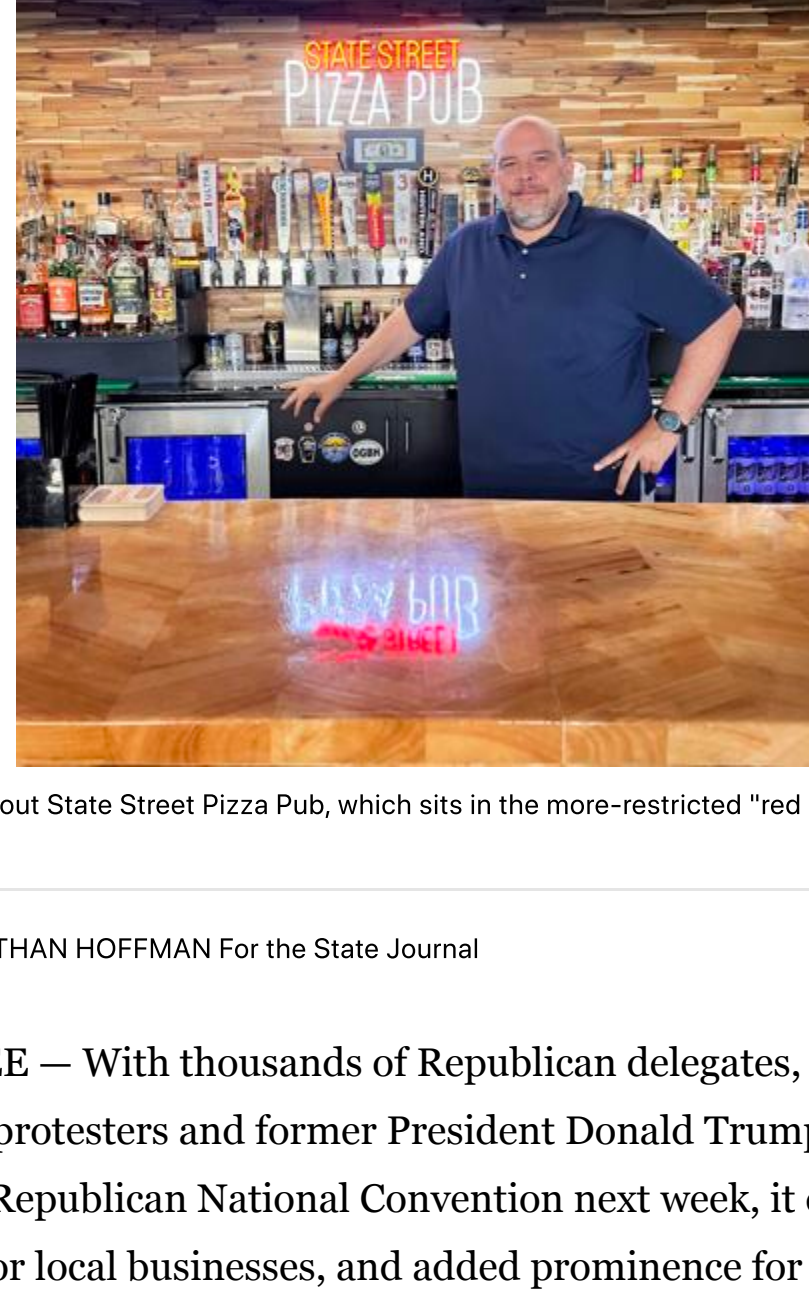


# Milwaukee businesses hope RNC convention will pay off

SYLVIE KIRSCH and JONATHAN HOFFMAN For the State Journal  
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The Republican National Committee is renting out State Street Pizza Pub, which sits in the more-restricted "red zone," said owner Andrew Fish. SYLVIE KIRSCH, FOR THE STATE JOURNAL

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**M**ILWAUKEE — With thousands of Republican delegates, elected officials, lobbyists, protesters and former President Donald Trump due to descend on Milwaukee for the Republican National Convention next week, it could mean a financial windfall for local businesses, and added prominence for the city.

Restaurants are stocking up on food, and bars are extending their hours, taking advantage of a **new state law** that allows them to stay open until 4 a.m. during the event.

Civic boosters who had geared up for the Democratic National Convention in 2020, only to have it moved largely online because of the COVID-19 pandemic, say they are grateful for all the attention, despite the fact that Milwaukee is a solidly Democratic city.

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"It's not red and blue — it's green for us," said Ryan Amundson, senior director of communications for the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce.

Alison Prange, the RNC Host Committee's chief operating officer, said the convention is expected to draw 50,000 visitors and generate a direct and indirect economic impact of around \$200 million, with additional benefits that could be felt for years to come.

But a few days before the convention kicks off with a "Red, White and Brew" welcome party featuring country singer Trace Adkins, all is not entirely rosy. Some restaurants report many fewer advance reservations than expected. As of May, hotel bookings were lower than for July 2023, though tourism agency Visit Milwaukee said reservations from Republican state delegations were still being finalized and major downtown hotels are reportedly full, at prices at least double usual rates.

## 📍 Republican National Convention puts spotlight on this Wisconsin city (it's not Milwaukee)

Some business owners and employees meanwhile worry about the costs and hassle of big crowds and security restrictions, in addition to the potential for violence or property damage, given the volatile political climate.

After months of preparation, merchants near Fiserv Forum — the convention's main venue — and the newly expanded Baird Center next door are in the final stretch of readying for a political event unprecedented in the city.

The areas surrounding the convention center are designated as "yellow" and "red" zones. While the yellow zone is open to pedestrians and bikes, vehicles will be subject to screening. The red zone, officially called the Pedestrian Restricted Perimeter, is only accessible by those who have credentials and tickets through pedestrian checkpoints. No taxis or food deliveries are allowed inside this area.

More than 100 vendors will be set up throughout the convention at the Baird Center. Other businesses in the area are preparing as best they can for an expected flood of customers.

## 'No litmus test'

Doc's Smokehouse, an expansive barbeque restaurant filled with pig paraphernalia and bourbon barrels, has been around for almost a decade. But for owner Brent Brashier, a big unknown is how he'll manage the crowd piling into the Deer District, home to Fiserv Forum.

"I've been in this business a long time," Brashier said. "I've worked Super Bowls, Formula 1 down in Austin, Texas. I've dealt with a lot of big events, but we have no litmus test" for an event like the convention.

He's not worried, though, adding: "I figure Republicans, bourbon and barbecue ought to work out pretty well."

At the Swinging Door Exchange, bartender Charlie Kawczynski said the owners have created a new breakfast menu for guests and lengthened the bar's hours of operation.

Mader's, a fourth-generation German restaurant in operation since 1913 that borders the red zone, is expanding its hours to serve large parties, said bar manager Jackie Porrett. Instead of being limited to 11:30 a.m. to 8 p.m., diners can now snag breakfast beginning at 7:30 a.m., dinner anytime until midnight, and late-night snacks until 3 a.m.

Other businesses, like Canary Coffee Bar in the yellow zone, are more in a hunker-down mode. The cafe has restricted its menu, hoping to avoid putting customers through long waits for food and inconveniencing its vendors.

"We're yanking back all of our food," said barista Lex Prevost. "We don't make enough of a profit at the end of the day. We also don't want to disrupt our relationship with our bakers because they would have to be coming through here at like 2, 3 or 4 in the morning going through a checkpoint."

## Warm welcome

Milwaukee has long been known as a Democratic stronghold, home to many union workers and with a history rooted in socialism. In 2020, President Joe Biden amassed 194,661 votes, or 78.83% of total votes cast, compared to Trump's 48,414.

But many are happy to host the convention, regardless of their personal politics.

At Major Goolsby's, bar manager Drew Olsen is surrounded by Green Bay Packers signs, Milwaukee Bucks posters and other sports memorabilia. Just past the entrance, a bench with a bronze Albert Einstein is draped with an American flag, and outside a painted Uncle Sam sign invites potential customers "to party with Major Goolsby."

"It's a political convention, and which side of the aisle really doesn't matter," Olsen said. "They're coming here with a lot of people and you want to welcome them with open arms."

For many, it's also chance to innovate.

Brashier is adding a beer garden to the parking lot connected to Doc's Smokehouse.

Andrew Fish, whose State Street Pizza Pub has been rented out by the Republican National Committee, plans to send his sons out to the news trucks stationed around the convention armed with pizzas to sell and has commissioned mugs with custom RNC artwork.

"I go by the two governance rules of the bar. We don't talk politics and we don't talk religion," said Fish. "I'm trying to make sure they have the best experience here."

The convention comes on top of other recent large events and developments in Milwaukee's flourishing downtown. The Milwaukee Bucks NBA playoff success in 2021 raised the city's profile nationally, and last year the popular NASCAR Truck Series returned after a 14-year hiatus. The Baird Center was recently expanded, and civic leaders say Milwaukee's star continues rising as a top Midwestern tourism and convention destination.

"This place just went through a massive renaissance in the last 20 years that I've been here, it's really an incredible place to be," said Kawczynski.

## Security concerns

Employees working at businesses within the security zones have had to go through federal background checks and obtain credentials to enter the area, allowing them access to the security zones through designated checkpoints.

Some worry about what the influx of security measures, including an increased police presence, will mean for residents — especially after a recent killing near the Fiserv Forum in an incident unrelated to the convention.

D'Vontaye Mitchell, 43, was killed June 30 outside the Hyatt Regency while being restrained by security guards after allegedly entering a women's restroom.

"And that happened on a slow Sunday," said Justin Calvert, general manager of the yellow-zoned Copper Bar and Restaurant. "What's going to happen when it's a bunch of that going on?"

Regardless of concerns, merchants are ready to see how the convention will play out.

"Whether it's the Democrats or Republicans, I think it's interesting to have all of these people in this little corner of Milwaukee," Brashier said. "It's going to be the center of the media universe for a few days in July."

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