

Cover story

LIFTING MORE THAN SPIRITS

Visitors to Jehovah's Witnesses conventions have added more than \$100 million to the Berks County economy.

BY ERIN NEGLEY
READING EAGLE

THIS SUMMER, 42,000 people traveled to Reading to explore, in an uncertain world, why God's word is truth.

Each free, three-day Jehovah's Witnesses district convention, organized by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York Inc., covers music, Scripture, theater, baptism and a chance for fellowship.

The convention isn't as flashy as the Sovereign Center's big concerts, but year after year, the Jehovah's Witnesses make the biggest economic impact for the center. The conventions were responsible for half of the center's economic activity in its first decade. Plenty of parishioners save by commuting to Reading, packing lunches and hunkering down in the center throughout the day. Yet the Witnesses have spent more than \$100 million on gas, hotels, shopping and meals in Berks County since the conventions came to town in 2005. They're also spending long weekends to experience what the county has to offer. [>>> 10]

More than 4,000 people attended a Friday session of the Jehovah's Witnesses convention at the Sovereign Center this month. The conventions have generated business for the center and for retail businesses in and close to Reading.



READING EAGLE: HAROLD HOCH

With more than 7,000 Jehovah's Witnesses coming downtown, managing the traffic becomes one of the main logistical challenges. Kelvin Wilson, left, an attendee from Hanover, York County, talks about parking with Lamar Coffman and Ramon Taylor of Baltimore and Dan Reither of Bethlehem.

Giving what they can

Jehovah's Witnesses conventions at the Sovereign Center have pumped more than \$100 million into the Berks County economy since 2005. The money comes in the form of spending at hotels, restaurants and shops.

Season	Total Convention Weekends	Convention Days	Total attendance	Average Daily Attendance	Spending
2005-06	3	9	66,194	7,355	\$10.8 million
2006-07	4	11	58,043	5,277	\$9.7 million
2007-08	6	17	48,701	2,865	\$8.5 million
2008-09	8	24	138,800	5,783	\$22.9 million
2009-10	8	24	185,373	7,724	\$30 million
2010-11	7	21	178,450	8,498	\$28.9 million
2011-12	9	26*	205,485	7,903	n/a

*One day canceled due to flooding.

Source: Sovereign Center Economic Impact: 2001-02 through 2010-11, Zane Collings

[9 >>>] "It's a very big positive," said Crystal Seitz, president of the Greater Reading Convention & Visitors Bureau. "I think the bigger positive is the energy and the public relations it brings to the city, when they go back home and talk about the experience they had here."

In biblical times, the faithful would regularly attend synagogue and then travel to a larger gathering, said Kelvin Wilson, spokesman for the Reading convention. Following that tradition, every year the Jehovah's Witnesses close their places of worship and host regional conventions. Aside from the annual recognition of the Lord's evening meal, the convention is the pinnacle event of the year.

At the conventions, witnesses get practical advice in everyday life and explore an annual theme. This year's is "God's Word is Truth." Often, families treat convention time as a family vacation. It's also a reunion or sorts.

"Every Witness family goes to these conventions," Wilson said.

The worldwide society, based in Brooklyn, organizes the conventions, which are planned by volunteers. As the church has grown, more cities host conventions.

Years ago, three conventions at the now-demolished Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia were sufficient, Wilson said. Now, there are dozens throughout the mid-Atlantic region. Church leaders look for host cities that have enough hotels and parking to take care of attendees.

"We can focus on what we came here for, and that's worship," Wilson said.

Summer is preferred for con-

ventions so everyone in the family can participate.

SMG, which manages Reading's two civic center venues, has worked with Jehovah's Witnesses conventions at other SMG locations. Zane Collings, civic center general manager, organized conventions in New York and Connecticut. When he came to Reading, he pitched the city as another potential site.

The fit made sense for a few reasons. The conventions happen in the summer when touring events are slower. The Witnesses also do extra work at the center, from painting and cleaning to fixing toilets and shampooing carpets.

The center, Greater Reading Convention & Visitors Bureau and member hotels spent 18 months negotiating an agreement on hotel rooms, rates and parking.

When that first contract was finalized for the 2005 convention, Seitz called it a benchmark event for Reading.

"It was a big event," she said. "We never had a convention in town that was five weekends."

The convention is still an asset for Reading and the area's businesses. The society has continued with one-year agreements with up to eight weekends per summer.

This year, witnesses came to Reading over six weekends, with about 7,000 attending



READING EAGLE: HAROLD HOCH

As part of living their faith, Jehovah's Witnesses attending events at the Sovereign Center spend part of their time in Reading doing extra work at the center. Roger Matthews, left, Joseph Jackson and Justin Williams, all of Baltimore, clean one of the stairwells.

each weekend.

The conventions have been a major part of the center's economic impact. The Sovereign Center's mission is to make a difference economically, bring people downtown and improve the area's quality of life, Collings said, and the conventions helped each category. During conventions, restaurants are busier and hotels are booked.

"I know they go shopping," Collings said. "I see the bags in here from VF Outlet."

Convention attendees spent more than \$128 million locally from 2005 through 2011, according to a Penn State Berks study on the economic impact of the Sovereign Center. The

study based the figure on a conservative estimate of each overnight attendee spending \$200 daily, including food, transportation, hotel and shopping.

The event's success prompted the center and the visitors bureau to pursue more conventions and religious touring acts.

When the convention came to Reading in 2005, organizers said they expected Jehovah's Witnesses to book more than 1,800 hotel rooms. Because hotels deal directly with convention organizers, it's difficult to track lodging figures, Seitz said.

At the Crowne Plaza Reading, Wyomissing, convention weekends typically sell out, said group sales manager Sheila Contento. The amount of rooms set aside at the 260-room hotel for the conventions varies from weekend to weekend, with a maximum of 175.

"It's a great source of revenue, not just for our hotel, but the city as well," Contento said.

One surprise in convention economics came from the number of attendees who pack lunches or return to their hotel rooms for dinner, Seitz said. At the same time, some restaurants have seen large groups of conventioners with their distinct name badges.

At the last convention of the summer, Richard and Lorelle Baugh and their son Logan ate the lunches they packed during the Friday intermission. They commuted from their home in Elizabethtown, enjoying old friends, making new ones and focusing on the spiritual.

They stopped at Chipotle in Spring Township on the way home the day before and planned to go to VF Outlets by the end of the convention.

Jimmie Kramer's Peanut Bar Restaurant on Penn Street sees more customers

during conventions, especially on Friday nights after the daily program ends. Otherwise, the attendees return to their hotels at the end of the day and don't come back to Reading until the next morning, said owner Michael Leifer.

Some businesses, such as the Italian and French Pastry Shop, have seen much bigger crowds on convention weekends. Business was so good during the first convention, owner Rose Dobson decided to open her North Sixth Street location on the weekend to accommodate the crowds.

"I wish they were here all the time," she said. "They help us tremendously."

The shop usually caters to downtown workers and often sees a drop in traffic with summer vacations.

Now, Dobson put out a sign in front of her store welcoming the Jehovah's Witnesses. She makes sure to make extra trays of homemade danishes, extra cake slices and ingredients for the popular breakfast sandwiches for the convention-goers.

While Dobson said some downtown workers might gripe about the inconvenience and extra traffic, she said she likes to see thousands of newcomers shopping at local businesses.

"I think it really helps our city," she said. "They're everywhere. They're booking hotels. They're eating here. They're definitely shopping."

Contact Erin Negley: 610-371-5047 or enegley@readingeagle.com.

Nobody Leases Like **Manderbach**

Berks County's Largest **Commercial Fleet Service**

Contact **Bob Keeney**
610-929-3683

Manderbach DOING BUSINESS FOR 67 YEARS
4450 N. 5th St. Highway **610-929-3683** ManderbachFord.com

FINANCIAL PLANNING? WE CAN HELP!

VAN REED
WEALTH MANAGEMENT LLC

- Comprehensive Financial Planning
- Retirement and Distribution Planning
- Social Security Timing Decisions to Max Your Benefit
- Portfolio Review & Analysis
- Retirement Plan Design
- Budgeting & Cash Flow Analysis
- Investment Research & Consulting
- Insurance Review
- Long Term Care Planning
- College Planning and FAFSA Assistance

2950 Van Reed Road
Reading, PA 19608
610.678.8999
www.vanreedwealth.com

Securities offered through Geneos Wealth Management, Inc. Member FINRA/SIPC. Investment Advisory Services offered through Geneos Wealth Management, Inc. and Van Reed Wealth Management, LLC

BANQUETS & BUSINESS FUNCTIONS

rooms for that *special* event

Ask about our outside catering

Chef Alan's American Bistro

Call or visit our website
www.chefalans.com

West Reading up to 200 guests | Fairgrounds up to 90 guests

WEST READING 6th & Penn Aves. • 610.375.4012
OUTSIDE CATERING HOTLINE 610.375.4012