

# Local hotel industry makes sustainability a word to work by

BY NINA LINCOFF

What's Greater Miami? Chances are, if you're a tourist, Greater Miami is beaches, sun, turquoise waters and palm trees.

Which is why, in the face of sea level rise, the area's hotel and tourism industry has long taken steps toward a sustainable future by cutting down on water use, reducing carbon footprints and continually adopting more efficient technology and operating processes.

"The hotel industry has been very proactive. It's really difficult to wrap your head around the real impact and multiplier effect of the hotel and tourism industry," said Nancy Scanlon, an associate professor at FIU's Chaplin School of Management and representative for the American Hotel and Lodging Industry, the International Tourism Industry and the Greater Miami & the Beaches Hotel Association's sustainability committee.

"What is critical to the health and wellbeing of this tourism industry is that the sandbox is healthy," Ms. Scanlon said.

There are about 50,000 hotel rooms in Greater Miami according to the hotel association. That's just hotel rooms. "That does not include apartments, condos, residential. And someone pointed out that that number doesn't include other spaces in the hotels like kitchens," she said.

Those tens of thousands of hotel rooms scale up to an even larger number of annual visitors. In 2013, 14.2 million

people visited Greater Miami and the beaches, according to the Greater Miami Convention & Visitors Bureau. In 2013, those visitors filled hotels to an average annual occupancy of 78% and in January-August of 2014, average occupancy across Greater Miami was 80%, the bureau reports.

"We are a forest of cranes on the skyline of Miami today. We are meeting the demand curve that our industry creates. As more people want to come here, we need to build more hotel rooms," Ms. Scanlon said. By the end of 2020, there should be 7,000 more hotel rooms added.

"We are building to meet the demands of our domestic and international visitor to come to Miami," Ms. Scanlon said. Water is incredibly important in many aspects of hotels, from sinks to showers to toilets in every room to ice to laundry and more. As more rooms are added, water management will become all the more important.

Hotels, like any other business, are constantly gauging and checking inputs, outputs and efficiencies. As a result, the industry has been engaged in sustainability measures for a long time.

When it comes to sea level rise and flooding, hotels in Miami are well aware of the challenges facing their business and their visitors. A quality visitor experience at a low operating cost is ideal, so any problem posed by outside factors is dealt with as well as possible – even if it's rising tides.

"We've been very proactive with sustainability. Whenever energy rates

went up, water rates, we've always adapted to new technologies in order to reduce our operating costs," Ms. Scanlon said.

In addition to water management, hotels also have been measuring and reporting carbon emissions. Major brands like Marriott, Hilton and Starwood already include carbon emission reporting in their hotel systems, Ms. Scanlon said. Reducing carbon footprints is important, not just for environmental groups but hotel brands as well. Partaking in green measures can also help attract visitors.

Certifications like the *Florida Green Lodging Program* from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection or TripAdvisor's GreenLeader Program offer a way for hotels that are engaging in sustainable practices to relay that information to visitors.

And those certifications work. Europeans tourists have long been attracted to green hotels and North American tourists are beginning to show a preference, Ms. Scanlon said. A GreenLeader certificate can mean a 20% increase in referral from TripAdvisor's reservation site to the hotel's reservation site, she said.

Of course, a major problem facing not just the hotel and tourism industry is an outdated storm sewer system.

"As water levels have risen, the storm water system has not been raised to adjust to that," Ms. Scanlon said. While local governments work to update the systems – and Miami Beach, the City of Miami and Miami-Dade County are

working to reduce flooding and improve storm water management – hotels are constantly looking to reduce waste water output. New hotels consider how to design around and mitigate flooding in certain areas.

"The hotel industry has a challenge. The purpose of the hotel business is to provide temporary residences to people, and depending on the type of hotel it also provides other amenities like conference space, clubs, entertainment, etc.," Ms. Scanlon said. "But all of these properties are owned by investors, so you get back to what the objectives of the investors are."

When it comes to sustainability and green design measures, it turns out that those measures line up with investor interests. "Of course we're concerned, and we have been concerned for a long time," Ms. Scanlon said.

Sustainable and responsible hotel design and risk mitigation also come into play when attracting investors to new projects. Even in desirable areas like Brickell or Miami Beach, before someone writes a check there needs to be some sort of assurance.

"Look at Brickell. People want to invest, and what you need to show investors is risk mitigation. You need to show that South Florida is doing its best to mitigate that risk," Ms. Scanlon said.

On Oct. 14, the Greater Miami & the Beaches Hotel Association will present its second annual sustainability awards, recognizing hotels that have taken up green initiatives.