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Subject: Two Museums Win Top Tourism Awards in South Carolina

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Two Museums in South Carolina Win Top Tourism Awards

Charleston – South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley recognized outstanding achievements in tourism Wednesday at the annual Governor's Conference on Tourism & Travel at the Belmond Charleston Place in Charleston. The annual awards honor projects and people who have excelled in tourism development, marketing and customer service.

The industry's highest honor – the Governor's Cup—was given to the South Carolina State Museum's "Windows to New Worlds" expansion for extraordinary achievements in growing tourism and promoting South Carolina as a great place to visit.

When it opened in August 2014, the newly expanded State Museum became the only attraction in the country to house a planetarium, 4-D theater, observatory and multi-disciplinary museum under one roof. Media coverage about its grand opening included more than 900 news stories with more than 15 million impressions. In its first year of operation, the new museum grew its revenue by 84 percent, increased attendance by 44 percent and placed an estimated economic impact on South Carolina of \$22 million after driving new business to local hotels and restaurants.

Its success was rooted in creative and strategic marketing as well as innovative business practices. One of its most successful efforts was a "Brighter Than Ever" public awareness campaign that launched a full year before the renovation was complete and built anticipation for the new attraction. The museum's marketing team also partnered with BI-LO grocery stores around the state to sell season passes.

Tourism's Charles A. Bundy Award, which recognizes tourism success in rural parts of South Carolina, was awarded to the new Colleton Museum and Farmers Market in Walterboro. About five years ago, the community moved its treasured museum into a renovated 1950s grocery store in the downtown area and added a farmer's market in the attached pavilion. What transpired was a unique blend of culture and agriculture that illustrated this small town's authentic appeal and enhanced the visitor experience. The museum continued to promote Colleton's heritage, and the farmer's market provided retail space for up to 50 local farmers who brought fresh fruits, vegetables, flowers and plants for sale.

In its former location, the Colleton Museum welcomed 4,908 visitors, most of whom were local. Visitation has steadily climbed since the museum was moved to its new location, and in 2015, the museum saw 18,350 visitors. The museum continues to draw visitors with special programming and events.

The Hospitality Employee of the Year Award was given to Sharon "P.J." Howell, a restaurant supervisor for Embassy Suites Columbia. She has been an employee of the hotel for more than 20 years, and rose up in the ranks to her current position five years ago. Managers at Embassy Suites Columbia call Howell the most dependable and hardworking employee they know, who often fills in where needed and leads by example. They also describe her as fun-loving and enjoyable, and said that some previous guests who are driving through Columbia stop by the hotel just to say hello to P.J. She is chairman of the hotel's CARE Committee, a group that seeks to improve employee morale and guest relations, and to provide contributions to the local community. Howell was Embassy Suites Columbia's Employee of the Month for October 2015 and November 2015, and was Employee of the Year for 2013.

The Governor's Conference on Tourism & Travel is held every winter in South Carolina as an opportunity for industry leaders to network, collaborate and leverage opportunities to grow tourism. For more information, contact Dawn

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SAVE THE DATE: Mark your calendar for February 15 – 17, 2016 for the 2016 Governor's Conference on Tourism & Travel. Please visit www.scgovcon.com for more information.



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