

Editorial: Twin Cities will miss Ortale's leadership

In a competitive market, he helped put us on the map.

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SELLING MINNEAPOLIS

"There's no city in North America, with the possible exception of Toronto, that compares to the quality of life, the beauty, the compactness we have here."

Greg Ortale, from a 1989 interview

When Greg Ortale took over the Greater Minneapolis Convention and Visitors Association in 1987, most convention planners and event organizers saw our quiet metropolis as little more than flyover country.

Ortale, more than any other single Twin Cities civic or business leader, changed that perception, building a first-rate organization -- now called Meet Minneapolis -- while working to lure major events such as the Super Bowl, the Final Four and next year's Republican National Convention.

So we were disappointed to learn this week that Ortale was leaving the chief executive's job with Meet Minneapolis for a similar position in Houston, where he worked for eight years before coming to Minneapolis. Ortale, 58, said he was drawn by the new challenges the Houston job offers, as well as a very nice compensation package.

On paper, we're a much more competitive host city than we were in 1987. The Minneapolis Convention Center was under construction when Ortale arrived, and he took over a convention bureau with just 17 employees and a \$1 million annual budget.

Today the 70-member staff at Meet Minneapolis operates with a \$9.1 million budget. More important, the bureau can sell prospective visitors on a 20-year track record of success in hosting major events.

That doesn't mean Ortale's successor won't face significant challenges, financial and otherwise. First, the entire metro area will be on display when the nation's media descend for the Republican Convention in St. Paul. As Ortale said this week, it's critical that the metro's largest cities effectively coordinate their convention efforts.

Another challenge will be to keep pace with cities that have followed the lead of Minneapolis in building convention centers and hotels that can attract major events. Denver and Indianapolis have made significant gains in tourism infrastructure in recent years, offering tough competition for the Twin Cities.

Ortale also had another, more philosophical message as he prepared to pack up his desk: We need to lose our civic inferiority complex and focus on the wealth of assets we offer visitors. We need to brag about our arts, culture, business and natural resources in ways that aren't always comfortable for understated natives.

Ortale's vision and leadership skills will be missed in Minneapolis and across the metro. Here's hoping he's succeeded by a leader who makes us forget that Houston's gain is our loss.