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Business leaders brace for G-8, NATO

Execs foresee financial benefits from summits in Chicago, but are taking precautions

By [Kathy Bergen](#) and Jeff Coen, Chicago Tribune reporters

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Talk to business leaders about the G-8 and NATO summits coming to Chicago this spring, and they universally say they hope the events are a chance to showcase the city as a global commercial center, political player and tourism draw.

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But in the next breath comes the concern. The events that will bring world leaders to Chicago conjure visions of annoying street closings that could hurt business and block employees from getting to work, not to mention the possibility of protesters running amok through clouds of tear gas.

From small shops near McCormick Place, where the summits will be held, to top corporations in the Loop, businesses in the city are making contingency plans. Chicago police and federal officials are promising they will keep things under control and keep the city functioning, but employers are considering adding their own security, getting hotel rooms for essential employees to stay near work and organizing communication chains to advise workers how to get around potential protest hot spots.

"We hope this will go by without any disruption, and that it is so smooth that no one knows summiteers floated into town. But we want to have the right measures in place too," said Brian Tishuk, executive director of ChicagoFIRST, a nonprofit association of companies whose operations are critical to U.S. financial markets. "We don't believe companies need to board up windows now, or put film on windows, though if they want to (put up the film), fine."

Getting out in the field to bring a sense of calm to the planning has become a priority for those charged with keeping the city safe during the overlapping summits May 19-21. On Wednesday evening, police Superintendent Garry McCarthy joined the boss of the U.S. Secret Service in Chicago and other officials to speak to downtown property managers and other professionals.

The briefing was hosted at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago by CoreNet Global, an association of real estate professionals. Chicago chapter President John Wichman said the event was sold out, with more than 500 people wanting a seat, in part because "few organizations or governmental bodies have provided any useful information to date."

Officials spoke to the audience and took questions for more than an hour, calling the events an opportunity for Chicago to shine on the world stage. They concentrated on the idea that there are things to be concerned about but nothing to fear. Still, those attending received brochures that suggested businesses have evacuation plans ready and blueprints on hand to speed repairs of damaged property.

McCarthy told the audience that recent events like the summits have attracted about 10,000 protesters. Police leaders have examined similar events across the country to devise strategies for keeping the peace while protecting protesters' rights.

"People are really experiencing a lot of consternation regarding this event," McCarthy said. "Our expectation is a peaceful event, our expectation is a minimum of disruption to the downtown area, and our expectation is to bring Chicago through this with the sense that we're a world-class city hosting a world-class event. ... That's not a hope, that's an expectation, that's the way we're looking at it."

Questions from the audience included whether employees will be able to get to work near secure areas and whether air travel will be normal (yes to both), and whether it is expected public transit will be interrupted or tear gas used to disperse crowds (no to both).

Officials said the area that will be most affected will be inside whatever security perimeter the Secret Service winds up setting up for the events themselves.

"The rest of the city is wide open for business," said Gary Schenkel of the city's Office of Emergency Management and Communications.

Although business leaders expressed optimism that would be the case, they nonetheless have concerns about what the highly publicized events will mean for their business.

"As every blog goes by, and everyone is talking about this protester and that one coming, I start to worry about bookings on either side of NATO/G-8 going away," said Laurence Geller, president and CEO of Strategic Hotels & Resorts, a real estate investment trust that owns the high-end Fairmont Chicago and the InterContinental Chicago.

His hotels and others are augmenting security, he said, taking steps similar to those employed during presidential visits. He declined to go into depth, but said precautions will include some simple moves, such as changing the shape and color of name tags each day; changing security pass codes daily; restricting elevator access to certain floors; and having limos use side or back doors.

Traffic issues and other logistics will make life difficult as well, he said.

"Staff will not get to work on time. What are you going to do if they can't get buses down Michigan Avenue?" he said. "The city will test everyone's patience."

Mayor Rahm Emanuel and officials leading the host committee have played down potential problems when discussing the summits, urging Chicagoans to consider what kind of boost they could be to the local economy. John Chikow, president and CEO of the Greater North Michigan Association, said retailers agree with Emanuel's projection that the summits can be good for business in the short and long term.

In conversations about the events, one luxury-goods purveyor on the avenue cited the unexpected pop in spending that occurred when Chinese President Hu Jintao came to town in January of last year, Chikow said.

But many businesses acknowledged they are preparing for the worst while hoping for the best.

Security firms have said they are doing work for Chicago businesses in two categories. The first are those that aren't likely to be targets of anti-globalization demonstrators and just want to get their employees to work. The second are the more high-profile corporations, some of which are considering significant boosts to security or arranging to have some employees work from home or branch offices.

"We're going to be open for business, but not everybody will need to be there those days. We're drawing up those contingencies, thinking them through," said Dan DeWaal, first vice president and chief security officer for OCC, formerly known as Options Clearing Corp., a Chicago-based firm that clears stock option and futures transactions. "We'll be watching closely as Metra and CTA issues evolve," DeWaal said.

But not all companies have that option. Hotels and restaurants can't scale back operations and let staff stay out of the central city.

"From our standpoint, it's all-hands-on-deck," said Marc Anderson, director of marketing for the Peninsula Chicago, one of the city's luxury hotels and a likely site for some dignitaries.

For many in the industry, security concerns are mixed with worries about whether the summits, or the news coverage leading up to them, will dampen business levels that week.

"It's good to have all the world leaders — it could be good for business and good for the city," said Kevin Brown, president and CEO of Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises Inc., whose downtown restaurants include Petterino's, Shaw's Crab House, Joe's and Hub 51.

"But we worry that people who live here or work here will be a little fearful about coming downtown. We hope not."

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