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Monday, April 5, 2010, 12:14pm EDT

Pa. restaurant group cancels annual trade show

Pittsburgh Business Times - by [Tim Schooley](#)

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The Pennsylvania Restaurant Association's annual trade show, a convention that has been a springtime tradition for restaurant owners, food suppliers and other hospitality-related businesses for more than 15 years, has been canceled this year.

Jeff Cohen, the past president and chairman of the board of the western chapter of the PRA, said the cost of the show and economic challenges of the organization's membership made canceling the show, typically held this week, a necessary decision.

"We just saw with the economic environment and people trying to watch their expenses that a year off might not be a bad idea," said Cohen, who owns **Weiss Provision**, based in Pittsburgh's Strip District.

Cohen estimated that the event typically would draw between 3,000 to 4,000 people. Last year, the trade show was held at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center in early April, drawing attendees that ranged from beer distributors, food wholesalers, restaurant owners and a variety of different businesses to serve them.

Another key factor in canceling the show this year was a lack of sponsorship, said Cohen. In previous years, the PRA would draw major broad-liners such as **U.S. Food Service** to sponsor the show, helping to defray its costs, he added, noting such companies have pulled back on their marketing budgets.

"The cost of holding these shows is very expensive today," said Cohen. "The main broad-liners really weren't that interested in stepping up and doing that and that was one of the main reasons" for canceling the show.

Ned Sokoloff, principal of Ross-based **Specialty Group**, a restaurant services company, said he has attended the annual trade show for as long as he could remember and has rented a booth at the event for the past 15 years.

Yet Sokoloff, also a PRA board member, understood and agreed with the decision to cancel it this year.

While he said the trade show was often a productive way to generate new business in the past, Sokoloff said he suspected it was no longer profitable to hold, adding the costs of renting a booth have continued to increase even as the business potential of it has weakened in what is still a very difficult economy for the restaurant industry.

"The days of the big food show behemoth are over," he said. "It's a sign of the times."

As the costs of attending the two-day event have grown, Sokoloff said other, less expensive methods of doing business have taken its place, whether over the phone, the Internet or in personal meetings.

He said his company was considering not going back even if the event was held.

Cohen emphasizes that the PRA may decide to return with the trade show in 2011, but no final decisions on when and where have yet been made.



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