

# Successful Event Planning

## Creating Plan B on the Fly

By Bonnie Browning



Photo courtesy: Bonnie K. Browning, AQS



Photo courtesy: FoxFotographyzenfolio.com



Photo courtesy: FoxFotographyzenfolio.com

OK, event planners, what would you do if three days out from expecting nearly 30,000 attendees at a four-and-a-half-day event you suddenly learned that 80,000 square feet of space, 2/3 of what you need, in addition to parking and numerous hotel rooms, would not be available due to an approaching flood?

What if the decorator already had the carpet and pipe and drape in place in anticipation of 300 vendors beginning their load-in the next day? What would you do with hundreds of exhibits worth thousands of dollars in the buildings you had to evacuate? And what if you were working with only your usual skeleton setup crew because this event had always gone off like clockwork?

This is exactly what happened to us as the producers of the American Quilter's Society Quilt Show & Contest in Paducah, Kentucky, in late April 2011.

For 26 years the annual AQS Quilt Show was held in the Julian Carroll Convention

Center and since 2002, the Paducah Expo Center, on the bank of the Ohio River without flood problems. Then, in 2011, heavy winter snowmelt saturated the ground before unusually wet spring weather dropped 17 inches of rain on the area in the ten days prior to the opening of the show.

In fact, the weather was so bad that as setup and quilt judging was being completed on Easter Sunday, tornado sirens forced moving some of the quilts and the three judges to an interior safe room, truly panicking one of them with no tornado experience at all.

Just when the all clear sounded, suddenly Plan B was needed. At 1:00 p.m. when the decorator was finishing and judging was near completion, the city engineer came to the site to tell show managers to vacate. The floodwall gates that protect Paducah (a city of 26,000) had to be installed, and doing so would cut off all access to the convention center buildings and parking. The only

contracted usable space that remained was the Pavilion, a 40,000 square foot air dome facility with no parking.

After the team got over the "deer in the headlights" shock, they sprang into action. Because there was no Plan B in place, a rapid assessment had to be made in order to create one. Over the course of four hours, this is what was done:

City staff and AQS staff pulled out cell phones to see who could open doors to empty buildings throughout the city to assess space availability. Volunteers were called to come evacuate the quilts while a plan was developed. Many of these people left their Easter family dinners to open building doors or to fold, organize, and safeguard the quilts. The decorator had to dismantle the pipe and drape, and all of the carpeting that had been laid for the show.

By 5:00 p.m. the management team was ready to scout, and they split up to look at alternative venues. The space

needs included vendor space (electric and phone), classrooms (heavy duty electric for irons and sewing machines), and exhibit space (spacious and secure). All of this had to be on some sort of transportation loop. Vacant mall buildings were looked at for exhibits and vendors and area churches for classrooms. When the show staff reconvened back at the convention center about 8:00 p.m., all of the options were discussed:

1. Cancel the event. This was not viable. Many of the vendors and visitors were already in town; they had nonrefundable hotel rooms and airplane tickets. Food vendors had already purchased food. The loss of the \$17 million economic impact from the event would be devastating to many local businesses; the annual AQS quilt show is better than Christmas for merchants in Paducah.
2. Find enough square footage to give all of the vendors their contracted amount of space, keeping the Pavilion plan in place. This would require multiple buildings and an unwieldy shuttle bus system to get to all of the locations. Vendors would not do well if they were spread out to so many locations.
3. Find enough space in a concentrated area to give all of the vendors at least some space. This would require relocating all of the exhibits and vendors, including those slated for the Pavilion. Adjust the transportation accordingly.

Option 3 was chosen, to use two adjacent buildings at the mall for special quilt exhibits and vendors. This space could accommodate all of the vendors by giving the sponsors their double booths and the other vendors a single booth. The First Baptist Church had ten classrooms for the 100+ workshops, their chapel could be used for lectures, and part of the contest quilts could be hung in the church's great room. When all of the tables and sewing machines for the classrooms had to be hand carried up the stairs of the church, the baseball team from a local college was recruited to help.

Now Plan B had to be implemented – It was 10:00 p.m., and the setup had to be completely re-done in time for the first event at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday evening. Vendors were expecting to load-in at 8:00 a.m. Monday morning.

First thing Monday morning the entire AQS staff was notified of the venue changes. Reassignments were worked out for vendor locations and staff jobs, and a press release was written to disseminate via email to vendors and instructors either at home or en-route. A quick adjustment to the event's show guide made it possible to insert one page indicating changes made for the show, including addresses of the new buildings involved. Staff created

“original location / new location” hand-outs to guide visitors to new venues.

At 10:00 a.m. AQS participated in a press conference with the mayor and other city leaders to announce to the public the course of action being taken to install the floodwall gates and what would happen to the quilt show.

Power and other utilities had to be installed in the vacant buildings; the buildings had to be cleaned (crews worked overnight on Sunday to get this done); and new drawings of the facilities had to be prepared for the decorator and matched to orders for vendor electricity and telephone services. Various city inspectors were on

Quilters who came to the show for the first time did not know anything was different. Those who had been to the show previously, applauded the work they knew had to happen to relocate everything so the show could go on. Two of our favorite testimonials:

“There is no quilt show comparable to Paducah!!! No matter how the parts and pieces are put together!”

“Blessed are the flexible, for they will not be bent out of shape.”

hand to make sure all of the new venues being used were up to code for the safety of visitors, vendors, instructors, and staff.

Finally, it was time to begin resetting the show in the new locations, which required additional decorator staff. The 40,000 square foot Pavilion became the headquarters for the show— admissions, membership, and workshop desks; First Aid; Post Office; wheelchair and scooter rental; and a package check area, plus the Best of Show award winning quilt and other major prize winners, the bed-sized contest quilts, and sponsor and vendor booths.

One of the biggest challenges was finding a place to put the food vendors – this event taxes every creature comfort including providing enough food for the visitors necessitating having outside food vendors who are normally located in the parking lot of the convention center. The ultimate fix for the food service was the biggest disappointment of the readjustments. Visitors found plenty of food when they traveled to the mall area, and the church turned out to have a wonderful food service, so the downtown restaurants and relocated food vendors did not do the business they expected.

Ten buses had been scheduled to provide transportation to/from the hotels

and attractions that contracted for that service. To support the new venues, two additional buses were contracted. The bus route maps were updated and copies were made to distribute to all venues.

Somewhere along the way, assistance was provided to countless visitors who were planning to stay across the river in Illinois, where some flooding had also occurred, with finding new hotel rooms.

By 5:00 p.m. Tuesday, all of the vendors had loaded in. The first evening event at 5:30 p.m. began on time.

Wednesday morning at 9:00 a.m., it looked like every quilt show ever hosted in Paducah: Hundreds of quilters were waiting for the doors to open and before long, the aisles were crowded and remained that way all day. Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, quilters continued to come— almost 27,000 attended this year's event.

The show went amazingly well when you consider the entire event was re-planned in eight hours time just three days before the show opened. Only two activities had to be cancelled as a result of the changes made in the show venues. Some vendors, even those in smaller booth spaces, said this was their best show ever.

Was all of this planning on the fly necessary? Just how serious was the situation on April 24 when we had to change gears? The danger was real; the Ohio River at Paducah crested at 55.8 feet, 16.9 feet above flood stage. The floodwall gates were not taken down until May 17.

While we never know what to expect from Mother Nature, quick action to develop an alternate plan and hard work by Mayor Bill Paxton, Judge Executive Van Newberry, the City of Paducah, McCracken County, City Engineer Rick Murphy, Mark Thompson at Paducah Parks Department, Paducah Expo & Convention Center, Paducah Visitors Bureau, Paducah Ambassadors, Freeman Decorating, Turner Communications, Anchor Trailways, Neil's Catering, ServiceMaster, First Baptist Church, utility companies, Mid-Continent University Baseball Team, American Quilter's Society's staff, and countless others, made it possible for the AQS Quilt Show to go on! Kudos to everyone involved, including our flexible, adaptable sponsors, vendors, instructors, and visitors.

Heed our advice: Nurture and appreciate good working relationships with your onsite providers; never underestimate the value of experienced event planning staff; and have a Plan B in place before you need one.

**Bonnie Browning** is the Executive Show Director of the American Quilter's Society. She can be reached at phone: 270-898-7903, ext. 146 or email: [bonniebrowning@AQSSquilt.com](mailto:bonniebrowning@AQSSquilt.com).