

# Best Laid Plans:

Planning for and Living through  
Major Growth in Rental Operations  
at the Huntsville Botanical Garden



# Quick History of Rental Operations

- Our Garden had two primary indoor rental venues, neither of which were originally designed or utilized for events.
- Repurposed as rental revenue opportunities, a small staff was created to support sales and event operations.



# Nichols Arbor

- The larger of our two venues, Nichols Arbor became available as a rental venue in 1995.
- Capacity: 160 seated, 199 standing reception.
- Also utilized a great deal for Garden functions and not available at all during the important Holiday party season.



# Murray Hall



- Previously built as the Garden's original Visitor Center, Murray Hall became available for use as a multi-purpose indoor rental venue.



- Capacity: 80 seated, 100 standing

# Multiple Outdoor Ceremony areas were developed

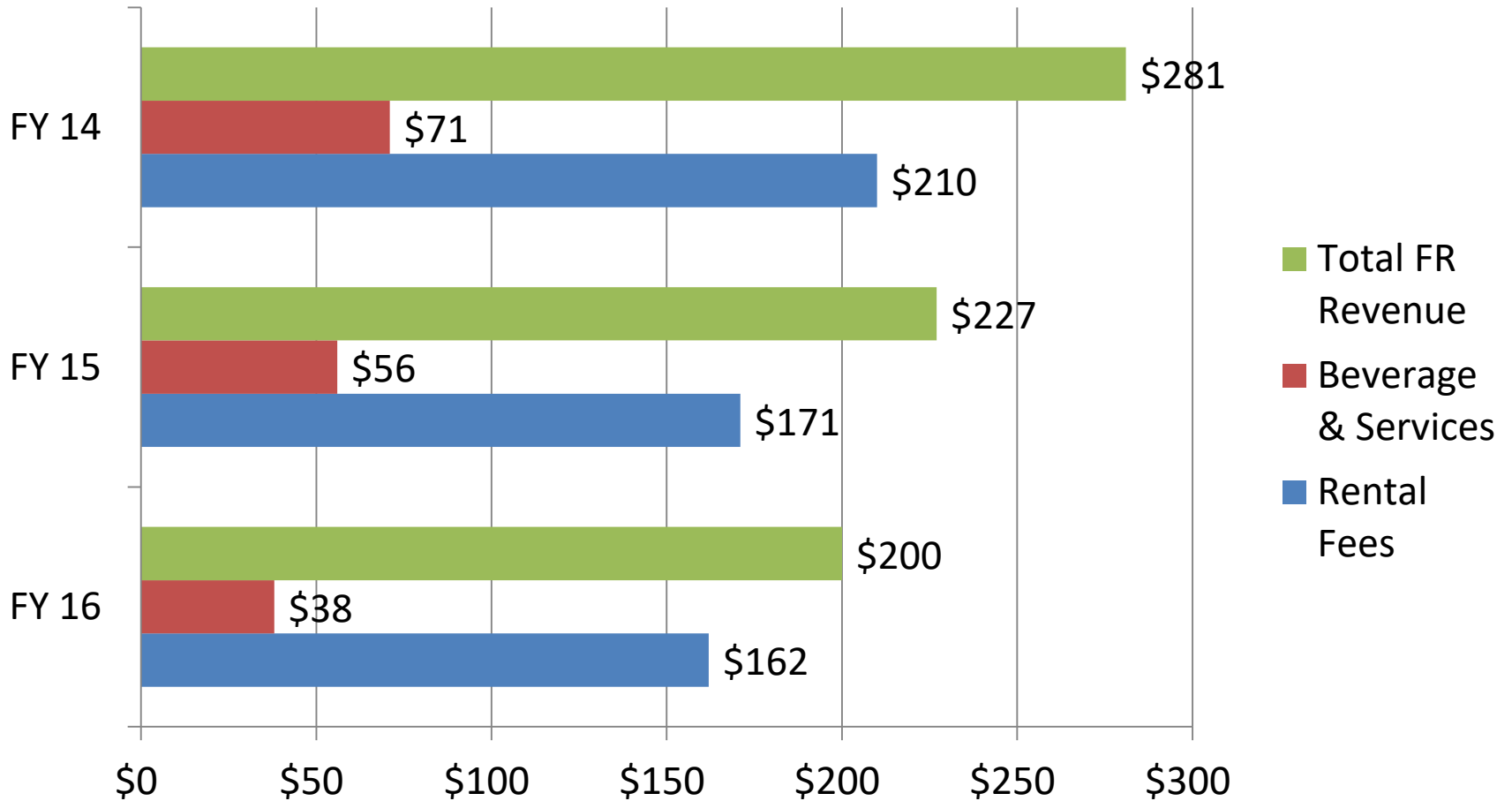


# Pre-Guest Center Considerations

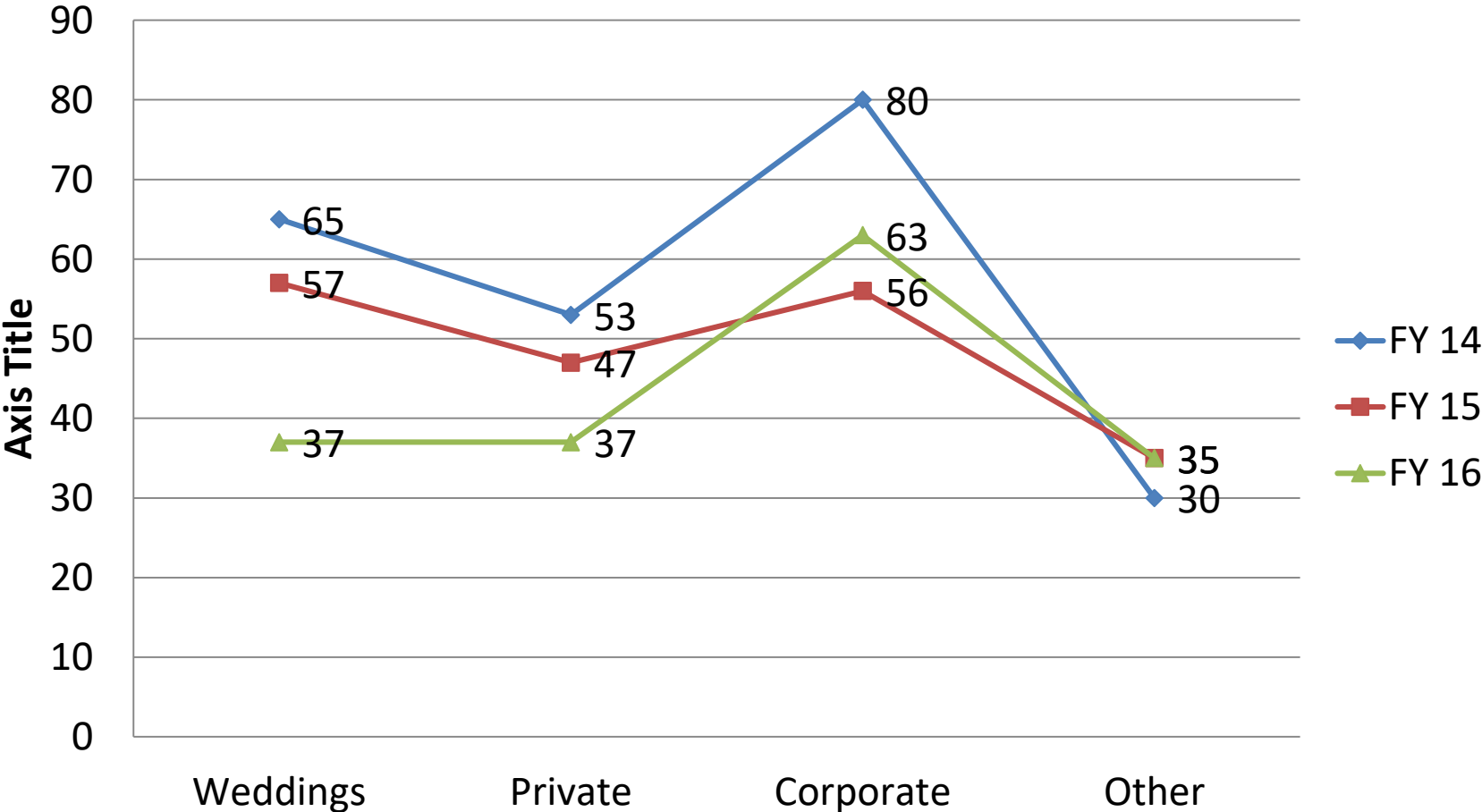
- Opportunities limited by capacity of venues
- Regular requests for events planned for over 300 guests
- # of events and FR revenues were starting to decline...fresh interest was needed
- More locations needed for **Garden** events
- Similar limiting factors with existing Visitor Center, creating a plateau in multiple sources of earned revenues

# Downward FR Financial Trends

*(Revenues in thousands)*



# Number of Revenue Generating Events Hosted





Changes were coming...  
*(Not one but THREE new venues!)*



# Building Design



MAIN LEVEL FLOOR PLAN



SECOND LEVEL FLOOR PLAN



# The Communities Garden

- Sought input, some unwanted
- Brought in caterers to ask for input on kitchens
- Invited wedding planners, photographers, caterers, florists along the way for open discussions (and help start spreading the word)



# Did we get this right?



# Building Design

- Hindsight is 20/20
  - Underestimated storage needs (bars, tables, chairs)
  - Bridal room for second venue (Carriage House)
  - More office space
  - Some things you just can't see
- Successes
  - Moveable dance floor and bars
  - Our first full cooking kitchen
  - Event capacity
  - Entry level for all access



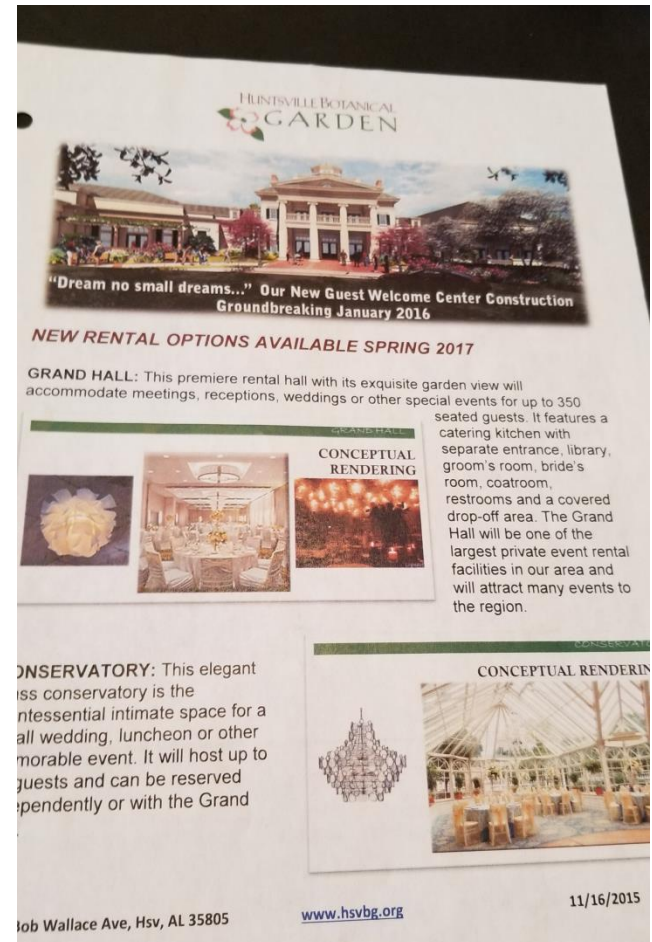
# Planning Phase

- In the beginning:
  - Packages, pricing, staffing, sales, marketing, alcohol sales, terms and conditions, value, projections
- Selling a wedding/event while in construction
  - Selling from drawings
  - Looking at construction work while selling
  - Continuing events through construction



# Development of Sales and Marketing Strategies

- Use of Digital Consultant... millennial age!
- Wedding Wire – to use or not? (Yes...then no)
- Trip to Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden
- Selling memories
- Refine, refine, refine
- Books opened 03.01.16!



# Grand Opening...here we go!

## March 10, 2017





# The Grand Hall

- Capacity: 350 seated dining, 450 standing reception
- Current A/V Technology
- Automated Blinds
- Outdoor Veranda
- Private Entry
- Full catering kitchen



# The Conservatory



- Capacity: 56 seated dining, 80 standing reception
- Unique venue with exceptional views of the Garden
- Exclusive availability



# The East Wing

- Grand Hall
- Veranda
- Library
- Bride's Parlor
- Groom's Suite
- Coatroom
- Porte cochere
- Full catering kitchen
- Private, upgraded restrooms.



# The Carriage House

- Capacity: 150 seated dining, 200 standing reception
- Exceptional Video Wall
- Catering Kitchen
- Bride's Parlor
- Oak doors open to outdoors



# Seeds of Opportunity

- A full menu of options – size, price range, and feel of the venue
- Multiple venue events
- Full, customizable services available
- Improvements to ceremony gardens
- Renewed demand for existing venues
- Tremendous exposure from hosting numerous large community events

# Wedding Bliss



# Wedding Packages



- Dream, Gold, Silver, and Carriage House Wedding Packages created
- Varies by number of venues, capacity, length of rental, added benefits
- Inclusive of Security, Staffed Rehearsal, Shuttle, Tables and Chairs
- April – October Saturdays – Package required

# Wedding Challenges

- Scale & Number of Events
  - Parking
  - Staffing
  - Bar staffing
  - Security
  - Directing guests to 5 venues/  
signage
  - Happy MOB's! Larger expectations
  - Created more procedures and processes  
than expected...still working on it!





# Outdoor Venues

- All outdoor venues are rented only with an indoor venue
- Incorporate Garden life
  - Exhibits
  - Special events
  - Garden visitors



# CEO's only daughter's wedding... no pressure



# The real story about Bars and Alcohol...who knew?!!



# Bars and Alcohol

- Challenges
  - Not prepared for quantity
  - Storage
  - Inventory process needed upgrading
  - Counting corks/bottle caps and hash marks for sales and billing!
  - Controlling outside alcohol
  - Buying alcohol and check requests
  - Large bars....unruly guests!



# Bar and Alcohol

- Technology
  - Purchased Point of Sale system to control inventory, sales and billing
  - Found a third-party electronic payment solution company to help us with our alcohol purchasing through distributors



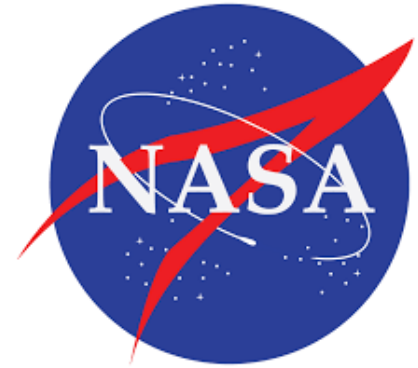
# Corporate Opportunities

- Space allowed for larger corporate parties
- Large off-site multi-venue opportunities
- New opportunities for holiday bookings
- Added exposure to potential clients



# Successes

- Rooms capacity filled a need in community
- THE VIEWS! (Embrace the Garden factor!)
- Larger corporate opportunities
  - Off-sites
  - Conferences
  - Multi-day rentals
- Advanced technology
  - Lighting
  - Audio
  - Visual
  - Hearing impaired Induction Loop



**American  
Red Cross**



**John Stallworth**  
Foundation *John Stallworth*

# We have to have FOOD!





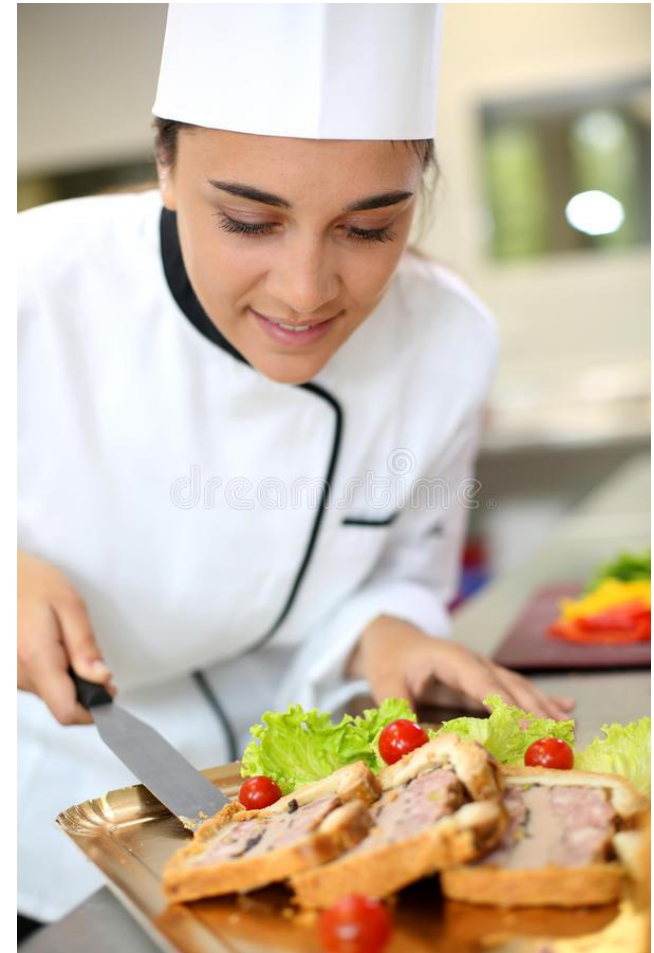
# Caterers

- Added an Approved Caterers process for the new venues only.
- Annual application process that includes on site training of what we expect.
- Accountability and good stewardship
- Allowed for exceptions with fee and training



# Outside vs. In-house Catering

- Pros of outside catering
  - The relationship is between caterer and client
  - The Garden is including and supporting our community businesses
  - Let's face it...they do food, clean up and go!
- Cons of outside catering
  - Communication
  - Upholding the standards of the Garden
  - Bad experiences still reflect on the Garden



# Outside vs. In-house Catering

- Pros of in-house catering
  - Control of standards and experience
  - Revenue generation
  - Convenience
- Cons of in-house catering
  - Creating a new department and control of overhead, expenses, expectations, staffing and storage in the midst of so much growth
  - Isolating the Garden from talented community
  - Remember “they do food, clean up and go!”



# Staffing needs

- Ongoing training – FR Sales & Admin grew from 2 to 6
- Office space for Rental team
- Hiring of more Event Leads, Bartenders and create new positions such as bar backs, lead bartender
- Changes in position titles needed
- Transfer of event set-ups to new Operational Services department supporting high volume/scale of individualized set-ups
- Larger security needs
- Increased cleaning and standards needs

**more. more. more.**

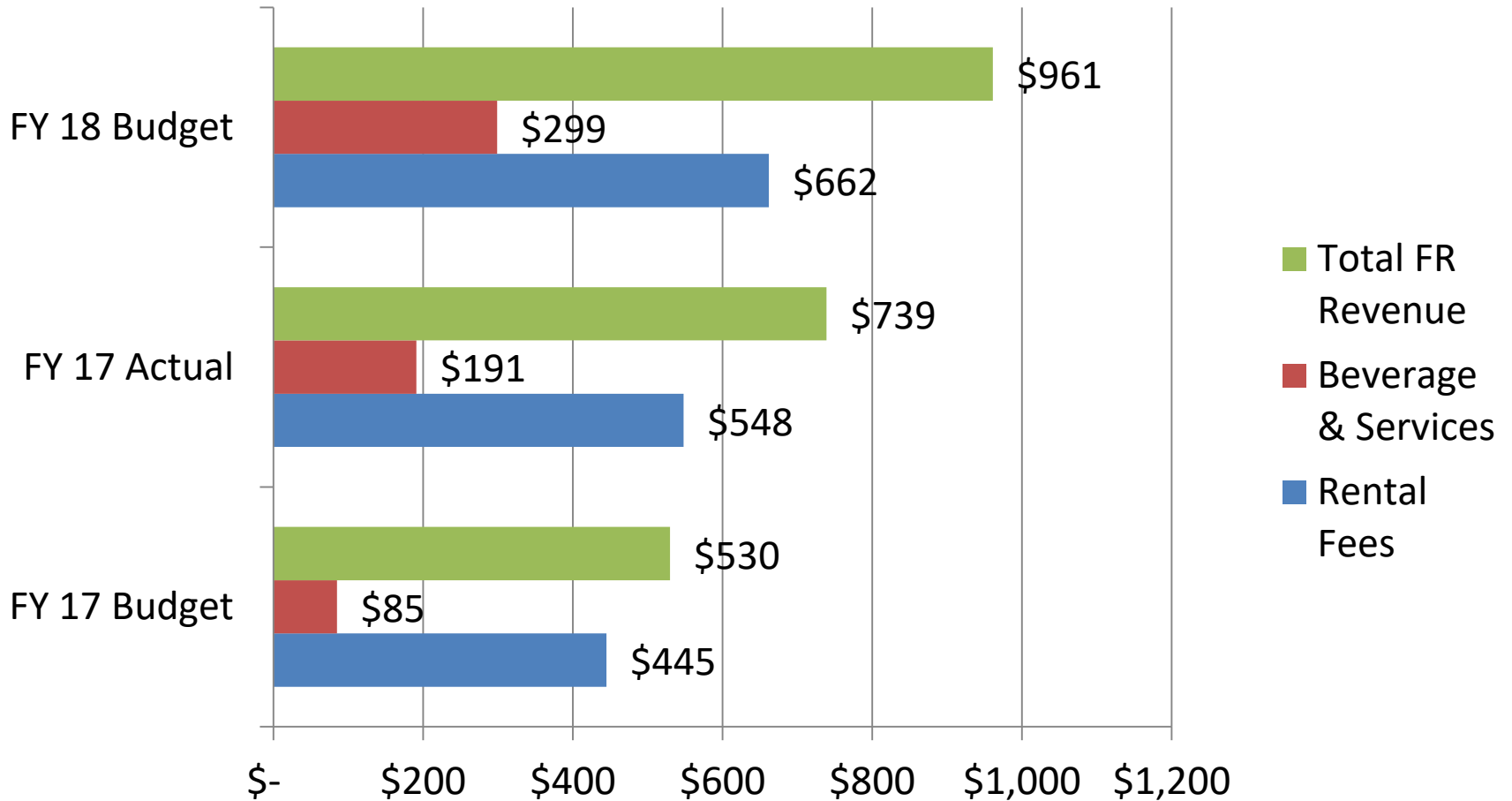
# Outside Services

- Currently using
  - Security for grounds and events
  - Approved caterers (trained in our facility)
  - Cleaning Services
- Possible future needs
  - Valet Parking
  - Parking Service
  - Event Coordinator



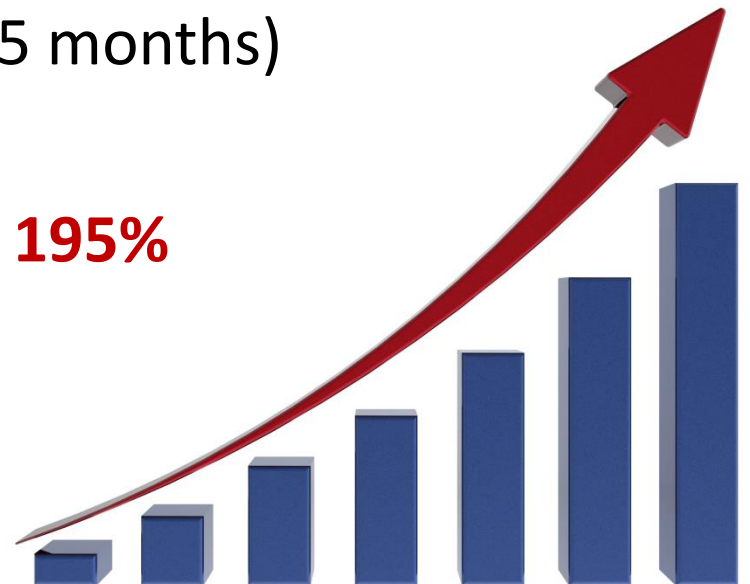
# Current Financial Results

*(Revenues in thousands)*



# Growth in Revenues & # of Events

- Number of Events Supported
  - Guest Center **open for only 6 months** of FY 17
  - 60 Weddings, 61 Private, 102 Corporate and 41 Other for a **total of 264** in FY 17 as compared to **172** in FY 16
  - FY 18 YTD total of 137 (first 5 months)
- FY 17 Revenue
  - Increased rental revenue by **195%**
  - Increased bar & services revenue by **403%**



# The other side of the coin...

## Expenses



- Overall operating expenses grew in an equal amount to growth in operating revenues
- Time is needed to evaluate processes and increase efficiencies
- FR Payroll (not including benefits) increased by 87% with additional hires ongoing
- Beverage services costs increased by 653%
- Outside staffing & security increased by 175%
- Financial needs for ongoing maintenance of venues, FF&E need to be effectively planned for



# Current Challenges in Facility Rental



- Alcohol – good revenue source, difficult to control
- Retaining event staff
- Fast paced growth
- Nuances with new types of events
- Need for process improvements
- Not enough time in the day
- Constant communication needed between staff, clients and vendors
- Personnel/HR upkeep
- Expense Analysis
- Internal Controls
- Office space/work space
- Storage
- Maintaining expectations
- Checklists, checklists, checklists

# What's next?

- A NAP!
- Always look for ways to better the experience...for staff and guests
- Continue to listen to the community and be good stewards to what has been given to us
- Rise to the challenges
- Have great expectations
- Share the knowledge and lessons learned



# Questions to discuss?

