

# What Every Meeting Planner Wants to Know

by Reesa Marchetti

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From start to finish, holding a successful retreat depends, in large part, on the advance work of a meeting planner. Whether they're volunteers or professionals, the questions they ask a facility prior to booking an event are crucial.

As Appel Farm Arts & Music Center's conference director, Walt Sibley would answer the usual queries — how many can you accommodate overnight, how many guests per room, or how many private rooms. But surprisingly, the most frequent question posed to Walt (who is now the CEO of Retreats Connection) was not about the lodging at all.

"Of course, they want to know your overnight capacity. But a more common concern is your meeting room size," Walt says.

"They especially want to know the capacity of your largest one, for events where all the participants will be together at one time."

It doesn't matter how many meeting rooms you have, Walt advises, if your largest can't hold the total number of people they're expecting. For the same reason, they'll want to know your dining room capacity. And if your restaurant space is acceptable, the planner may ask if you supply the meals or if they must bring a caterer.

"Appel Farm really is a farm, an organic one at that," Walt says, "so on-site food service was never a problem during my tenure there."

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Meeting planners also are concerned with matters that rural venues may not encounter, such as ADA compliance, security or private transportation. "I realize that your facilities can be very rustic," says Keena Collins, a corporate meeting and event planner, "but I have clients who would have concerns with these issues."

How close the police and fire departments are to the facility is significant for the meetings that Keena

plans. "Is the property secured while my guests are at the event?" she asks of venues she's considering. "Who's responsible for the well-being of the attendees? And in case of an emergency, is there an evacuation plan in place?"

Keena's customers want to know which "outsiders" will have access

to a property while their guests are on the grounds. "How do you keep track of anyone not approved to attend the event?" she wonders. "And will the clients have access to and from the property upon demand?"

Providing equipment for the meeting rooms is a benefit that has become a standard in most facilities. In addition to the required tables and chairs, planners often expect audio-visual aids — projectors, screens, sound systems, computer or TV/VCR setups — and easel boards, marking pads, chalkboards, markers, and tape.

"One group always wanted a wire hanging down from the ceiling," Walt recalls. "Another wanted extra blankets to use in their workshop." And almost all wanted to know: Is a copy machine available?"

*"Keena was very helpful, and we look forward to calling on her expertise again in the future."*

*Reesa Marchetti,  
Retreats Connection*

—continued

This added equipment calls for personnel to set it up. In fact, the planner may require a staff person to be available 24 hours a day.

The details of the lodging are important, too. "Are they double rooms or dormitory style?" Walt was asked repeatedly at Appel Farm. "What kind of beds: twin, double or larger; or are they camp bunks?"

Bathrooms are a given, and usually, each room has its own. In rural facilities, however, the rest room may be down the hall. Amenities such as linens and room heating or air conditioning aren't necessarily included, especially if the facility is a campground or lodge. "Do we have to bring our own?" a planner will want to know.

Finally, distance is important, not just from the airport to the facility, but within the facility itself. "How far will I have to walk to the dining room or to the meeting rooms, planners would ask me," Walt says. "Then when the activities end for the day, they'll want to know how far it is to public transportation."

*Keena stresses the importance of private limos or vans, whether airport- or facility-owned, to transport guests in number. Her clients also want cabs or rental cars to be close by, she says.*

When a successful retreat draws to a close, few participants will be thinking about the meeting planner. "Is this thoughtlessness?" the planner's last question may be.

No, just the result of a **job well done!**

**Keena Collins**, certified meeting professional, is the owner of the meeting and event consulting firm **Keena & Company**.

Walter C Sibley, who has advised nonprofit and educational organizations for more than 30 years, is the CEO & founder of Retreats Connection.  
<http://RetreatsConnection.com>