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Capital Business

# With the end of FOSE, government-dependent trade shows take yet another hit



By **Abha Bhattarai** November 16 at 10:14 PM

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Following a 37-year run as one of the nation's premier government technology events, conference organizers last week announced that FOSE would not be returning in 2015.

The demise of the event, once a coveted gathering place for technology companies and government workers, comes at a time when sequestration-related cuts continue to take their toll on government-related conferences and trade shows.

“We decided not to produce FOSE in 2015 primarily because we have a lot of other ideas and new projects in the works,” said Anne Armstrong, co-president of the 1105 Public Sector Media Group, which oversees the trade show. “Technology has changed quite a bit in 37 years, and the way people buy technology has also

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Armstrong would not offer details on what those new plans were, but said they would be aimed at a similar audience. FOSE — which at one time stood for Federal Office Systems Expo — drew 5,000 people to the Walter E. Washington Convention Center this summer.

Dwindling government budgets, combined with a rise in corporate events hosted by the likes of Microsoft, Apple and Cisco, have dealt a blow to trade shows that rely heavily on federal government attendees and exhibitors.

Last year's sequestration further tipped the scales, according to David DuBois, president and chief executive of the International Association of Exhibitions and Events.

"Of course with the effects of sequestration, it's no surprise that the FOSE show has decided to end their great run," DuBois said. "When you have economic tough times, a show like FOSE that's built around federal employee attendance is not able to get those ladies and gentlemen out of their offices."

That wasn't always the case.

"In the early and mid 1990s, being at FOSE was akin to being at the hottest club in New York or LA," Mark Amtower, a government contracting consultant, wrote on LinkedIn last week.

In recent years, however, much of the luster around the

conference had disappeared, said Tien Wong, a local entrepreneur and investor who has been attending FOSE since the mid-1990s.

“The energy and buzz factor was a lot lower the past couple of years, and the quality of programming had begun slipping a bit,” he said. “It’s a shame because from a branding perspective, everybody knows FOSE.”

FOSE once was backed by the former parent company of The Washington Post. It was sold to 1105 Media [in 2006](#).

The decision to end FOSE’s run comes just weeks after Chatsworth, Calif.-based 1105 Media announced that founding chief executive Neal Vitale would be replaced by Rajeev Kapur, formerly chief executive at Sonic Emotion, a Switzerland-based sound technology company.

Overall, attendance at trade shows that rely on federal government participation is down 30 percent so far this year, DuBois said, even as overall trade show attendance continues to grow about 2 percent year-over-year.

Trade show business has remained unchanged in the District in recent years. The Washington Convention Center, for example, consistently hosts between three and five trade shows per year, according to Greg O’Dell, president and chief executive of Events D.C., which oversees the convention center.

“Flat has been the norm, both at the trade show level

The tide may slowly be changing. DuBois says he expects an improving economy to lift the trade show industry by up to 4 percent next year.

"We're just beginning to see a pick-up," he said of the country's \$8 billion exhibition industry. "When the economy is good and the ducks are flying, companies have more money to put toward sales and marketing."

To draw a bigger pool of attendees, many groups are opting for smaller regional shows in lieu of one large national conference. Attendees who might not have the funds to pay for airfare and a hotel in another city may be likely to purchase a day pass for an event within driving distance, Dubois said.

"A lot of times, when a big national show is shrinking away, they'll say, 'Let's do four smaller regional shows instead,' " he said. "If you take the shows to where customers are, they're more likely to come."

That's one approach 1105 is taking next year. Armstrong said the company is making arrangements to split its 12-year-old Enterprise Architecture conference, typically held at the Washington Convention Center, into two smaller events next year: One on the East Coast, another on the West.

"In times of tight money, it makes sense to get close to the customer," she said.

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