The first major test of the city's convention industry since Hurricane
Katrina will be this week, as more than 18,000 members of the American
Library Association stream into town for their annual conference at the
Ernest N. Morial Convention Center.

The city's handling of this event, one of the nation's largest conventions,
will go a long way toward preserving -- or diminishing -- its reputation as
a premier convention destination. The city is currently on its way to
surpassing 2004 convention business.

To keep the city in the convention spotlight, the Convention & Visitors
Bureau is not only trying to erase images of the Convention Center as a
desolate refuge for hurricane evacuees, but it also is dealing with the
deployment of the National Guard to help fight crime on the heels of five
murders in Central City early Saturday morning.

But city officials and meeting planners are confident the city will prove
that it is open for convention business.

"This is obviously huge. I'll be surprised if the city isn't prepared to manage this beautifully," said Deborah Sexton, president and CEO of the Professional Convention Management Association. "New Orleans has always delivered a very exciting experience from the food and beverages to cultural events. I think people are looking to see if that destination still exists."

On the right foot

The library convention's significance is not lost on the local tourism industry, which spent Monday cleaning heavily trafficked areas of the French Quarter, Central Business District and Garden District, nor on Convention Center officials, who plan to greet the crowds with a refurbished building.

"This week marks the reopening of the New Orleans convention business," said Stephen Perry, president of the Metropolitan Convention & Visitors Bureau Inc. Perry said the hospitality industry has spent the past few months focused on leisure travel, small corporate meetings and planned events such as Mardi Gras and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. "Now we are showing the world that we are completely open as far as citywide conventions," he said.
Before Hurricane Katrina wiped every convention off the books, the hospitality industry was preparing for a banner year in 2005. Convention bookings for the year were up 14 percent from 2004. The uptick signaled a rebound after several years of depressed convention business following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The jump was expected to be even higher in 2006, Perry said. Instead, 2005 ended with more than 40 canceled events, the Convention Center was closed for business from September through March and there floated considerable uncertainty about the future.

But business is already picking up again. More conventioneers are expected in town this fall than for the same time in 2004: 84,000 this year compared with 66,500 then. The anticipated business, though, is about half of what had been planned for this year before Katrina.

A sharp eye on us

Convention industry officials predict this will be an opportunity to undo negative perceptions of the city and beef up future convention business.

Jimmie D. Fore, president and general manager of the Convention Center, said he expects 30 to 40 convention show managers to visit the city this week "to look at how we handle" the American Library Association conference. Their opinions of the city's ability to accommodate the library association could
affect how many conventions the city can attract in the future.

"We're under a little bit of a microscope right now," Perry said. "Many people in the trade are evaluating our ability to handle large meetings."

Among them will be the Professional Convention Management Association, whose members are meeting industry professionals. Sexton said the group will evaluate things such as whether there is appropriate staffing and service in New Orleans.

Likewise, Mark S. Andrew, chairman of the board of directors for Meeting Professionals International, said that as New Orleans continues to recover, "it is important that these types of events occur with nothing but success."

Sexton said, however, the city will be allowed a few flubs.

"If it isn't exactly to the degree and level that it was in the past, I think there will be a lot of understanding," she said. "People are generous enough to understand that as you staff up after nine months you're potentially not able to deliver flawlessly, but you are going to deliver well. But there's no question people are watching."

A whole new look
The Convention Center has spent $60 million on restoration and renovation work both inside and outside the building.

"A great deal of effort has been devoted to trying to change those things that so many millions of people saw about the building," Fore said. "It was extremely important to change the look of the building."

Changes include new carpet, paint and fixtures. The food courts reopened this week, as did a business services company located in the center.

About 30 percent of the Convention Center remains closed. Eight of the 12 halls and 99 of the 140 meeting rooms have reopened. The remaining rooms and halls are being renovated and will open in November.

Also hoping to make a stellar impression, several hospitality industry groups on Monday cleaned areas of the French Quarter, Central Business District and the Garden District as part of a campaign called "Company's Coming."

"We want to do everything we can," said Darrius Gray, 2006 president of the Greater New Orleans Hotel and Lodging Association and general manager of the Holiday Inn French Quarter Hotel. "I think this is certainly a barometer of
our progress and we want to make sure that everything goes off without a hitch. This could be the impetus to get things going from a convention standpoint."

There are about 27,900 available hotel rooms in the metro area, down from 38,000 before Katrina. Several large hotels, including the Hyatt Regency, the Fairmont and the Ritz-Carlton, have not reopened. Many of the hotels that have reopened are doing so with newly renovated rooms, having taken the downturn in business post-Katrina as an opportunity to make repairs, Gray said.

"I think for the most part the hotels have been spruced up," Gray said. And restaurants that normally are closed on Sunday will be open. "We just want every one of our customers to know how much we appreciate their business and that you can come to New Orleans."

Crime is a big issue

It will be harder to spruce up the city's recent image as a haven for crime.

Leslie Burger, president-elect of the American Library Association, said some members "expressed concern" about continuing with the convention.
"The issue related to crime and safety has been an issue all along," Burger said. "That certainly brought the issue to the forefront."

The group posted information from the city on its Web site to assure members that New Orleans was safe, she said. Burger added that while there have been cancellations since then, she doesn't know whether any were related to fears about safety.

Perry is careful to make the point that the additional protection from the National Guard and State Police is a good thing. It does not mean the city is overrun with crime, but that officials are working to prevent that from becoming the case.

The visitors bureau is addressing the recent events with fliers passed out at local hotels. The page-long letter tells visitors that historic areas of town are safe and that the National Guard has been called in to patrol outlying damaged and sparsely populated areas. It also recommends that visitors walk in the French Quarter, Warehouse District, CBD and Garden District.

"Fighting crime is good business," Perry said. "But we have to be careful to manage the message that we are attacking drug-related violence and enhancing the safety aspect of the tourist visit to the city."