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Convention Center is About Jobs and Timing

By John Groh

“Move ahead,” urged Winnebago County Board Chairman Scott Christiansen. “We must invest in a vital downtown, those things that will retain and attract companies like Hamilton Sundstrand and Woodward,” said Rockford Mayor Larry Morrissey.

Other leaders also voiced strong support when the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau announced the findings of the Convention Center/Hotel Analysis at a public meeting on Jan. 13 at Burpee Museum of Natural History. More than 100 community leaders and interested citizens attended.

Last year the RACVB, in partnership with the City of Rockford, commissioned a feasibility analysis of a convention center/hotel in downtown Rockford by C.H. Johnson Consulting.

Take Charge of Our Future

The analysis indicated a moderately-sized convention center/hotel development would add a significant number of jobs to a community that has 15.5 percent unemployment, the highest in the state. Among the trades, unemployment here is 35 percent. A facility like this could be a community resource and asset to residents and visitors alike. By moving forward on this project, looking at how to finance this and welcoming public feedback, we have a real opportunity to take charge of our future instead of letting things just happen to us.

Visitors Mean Jobs

The consultant recommended that a high-quality conference center and hotel be built in downtown Rockford. The primary benefits are the 450 construction jobs and 296 full-time hospitality jobs; the \$36.6 million in visitor spending that would be added annually to our economy; the \$2.7 million in taxes that would be generated and \$8.4 million in new wages and salaries.

The timing is right for this. Locally, there is downtown momentum on our side and nationally, there is an ongoing need for meeting and convention space that a convention center can fill.

Can Fill Unmet Need for Meeting Space

The analysis studied the meeting and conference industry. Many people are being retrained and signing up for continuing-education and professional development classes in hopes of new or better jobs. As communities compete to attract employers and improve their economic situation, and as business travel rebounds there is a nationwide demand for meeting and conference space that is not being met.

The Rockford area is losing mid-sized meetings and conferences to our cities. The analysis tells us a 58,500 square foot convention center would help us attract that business and add more than \$36 million to our economy. Rockford already has a good reputation among regional meeting planners for being an affordable destination, so adding quality meeting and conference space could be successful.

Other Communities Have Benefited

The analysis looked at convention center/hotels in seven other communities. In all cases, each community was more than satisfied with their facilities. In the consultant's opinion, a project like this in downtown Rockford would do as well. While these types of publicly supported facilities generally require some support, it is greatly outweighed by the positive economic impact they have on their communities.

Next Steps

What's next? We need to see which financial model is appropriate. Community leaders will make site visits to comparable convention center/hotel developments. The discussion will continue at public meetings so that the community can learn more and ask questions about how Rockford should move forward. At stake are 450 construction jobs and 296 full-time hospitality jobs and nearly \$37 million in new, annual economic activity for our community.

John Groh is president/CEO of the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. For a complete copy of the convention center report, go to gorockford.com.

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