

New, repeat customers help grow tourism's impact

The Rockford Region has built a strong reputation as an amateur sports destination. Through continued investment in our sports facilities, we have further positioned our community as a leader in this market. It's important that we continue to meet the demands of the market if we wish maintain our status and continue to grow, but we must also remember that investments don't always have to be large to have a significant impact.

Last year the visitors bureau purchased 14 portable pitching mounds that convert softball diamonds to baseball diamonds. Ten mounds went to the Rockford Park District and four to the Harlem Community Center. The total cost was just \$11,500.

That investment had an immediate impact. Triple Crown Sports, Game Day USA, United States Specialty Sports Association (USSSA) and Fletcher Baseball all brought baseball tournaments to the Rockford Region last summer as a result of the pitching mounds. Those tournaments generated over \$1 million dollars for the community. Not only will those organizations return this year, some are also expanding, and they credit the region's investment in its facilities for their growth.

Creating an Atmosphere for Expansion

"The Rockford area's continued investment in sporting facilities has allowed our tournaments to grow and opened the way for us to create Bison Sporting Events," said Kelly Robison, owner of Bison Sports and a local native. Robison created Bison Sports, to organize sports tournaments. He previously served as an event coordinator for USSSA. In addition to bringing back four previous tournaments, his company will add ten new tournaments to the region this summer. The youth softball and baseball tournaments include high-profile sanctioning groups like USSSA and North American Fastpitch Association (NAFA). The tournaments will bring more than 6,300 players and coaches, and an additional 7,900 spectators, to the region and generate an estimated \$520,000 for the local economy.

Game Day USA will also grow from two to four tournaments. The games played at Sportscore One and Searls Park will bring more than 3,240 players, coaches and their fans to the region and generate an estimated \$234,000 for the local economy. Game Day President/CEO Rich Janor credits Rockford's location and facilities for the expansion.

"The diamonds and facilities in Rockford are outstanding, and that has led to wonderful word-of-mouth advertising," said Janor. "The teams that participated last year plan to return this summer, and they're telling others about their experience." Janor says he would like to bring additional tournaments to Rockford in the future, but is limited by the number of diamonds available.

Welcoming Returning Business

Other events continue to make Rockford their home each year because of the quality and value the Rockford Region offers and our ability to work together as a community. For example, the Illinois High School Association recently held its 38th Annual Girls Bowling State Championships in Rockford. It was the 18th consecutive year the region hosted the event, which drew approximately 600 competitors, coaches and spectators to the region.

We must look to the future

To maintain our place as a leading sports destination, we must look forward. We have strong partnerships that include the Rockford Park District, our hotel community, restaurants and municipalities that work together to make sure these events and tournaments are successful and return to the region. You can help ensure we continue to grow. If you know a group that could meet or play here, contact the RACVB at 815.963.8111. Our staff will work with you to help bring that business to our community.