

## **It's Time to Invest in a Comprehensive Visitor Experience**

For the past two years we've been stressing the importance of investing in a comprehensive visitor experience; one that connects the dots creating a coordinated and integrated environment that is attractive to visitors and residents alike. While we still have a long way to grow, we have made some significant strides forward and have some great success stories.

### **Great Gardens Just Got Better**

In October, the Rockford Park District's Nicholas Conservatory & Gardens held its grand opening. The 22,000 square-foot facility claims the title of the third largest conservatory in the state. If you haven't been yet, GO. It's outstanding. Combine this new facility with Anderson Japanese Gardens, Heritage Gardens at Midway Village Museum, Klehm Arboretum & Botanic Garden, La Paloma Gardens, Sinnissippi Gardens and Tinker Swiss Cottage & Gardens and you've created a wonderful, overnight destination for garden enthusiasts.

That is something that hasn't gone unnoticed by these local gardens. The existing gardens joined together last spring to create "Great Gardens Rockford" which works to jointly market these wonderful attractions to visitors through brochures and at home and garden shows.

### **Downtown Events Make a Connection**

Rockford City Market and Friday Night Flix have been repeatedly recognized for their success in transforming downtown on Friday nights. But much of that success lies in the fact they "connected the dots." These two separate events spent their first year working together to turn their individual success into a synergistic experience, coordinating times, cross promoting and communicating together. They also took it one step further and created a physical connection by incorporating the Rockford Mass Transit trolley; providing a link between the market, movies, museums and other downtown destinations. Both just concluded their second year and together with the new Saturday Soundstage at Davis Park welcomed more than 65,000 people downtown on Friday and Saturday nights.

### **Time to Efficiently Move People Around**

Now it's time for us as a community to, like the market and movies, physically connect our products. We already have a good beginning.

As you drive over the Jefferson or Whitman Street bridges you can see progress in the \$7 million riverwalk project at Riverfront Museum Park. The project, which will be completed next year, will include a lighted cable bridge, boat docks, open-air amphitheater and paths connecting the riverfront with Main Street. When complete Riverfront Museum Park will have a park like setting that people can enjoy the river from.

Recently, the Rockford Park District put the river to use and tested the idea of a water taxi at this year's On the Waterfront. The Forest City Queen ferried nearly 400 people between Martin Park and Beattie Park Labor Day weekend. Officials are considering the idea of using the boat in a pilot program that would connect the conservatory, Riverfront Museum Park and downtown.

While park district officials look at the river, the city is looking at its streets. Recently approved, the City of Rockford 2012-2016 Capital Improvement Plan includes converting downtown's one-way street pattern on Main and Church and portions of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> streets into a two-way system. Returning two-way traffic to downtown creates a less confusing traffic pattern, making our community more welcome to guests. It also increases the exposure of downtown

businesses, helping out-of-town visitors identify their intended retail or restaurant stop and finding new businesses and restaurants to explore.

### **Take that Step!**

In the last couple years we've proven that we can have a bigger impact when we work together. We've connected dots and looked forward, not back. We've seen a new vision for our future take shape, and we are taking steps to get there. It's important that we continue to invest in this new future and connect more dots, creating a great experience for local residents and attracts visitors to our community.