

Roundtable Feedback Focused on Linking and Capitalizing on Opportunities

Each year RACVB seeks community input on tourism related issues through a series of roundtable discussions. Hoteliers, site and attraction staffers, government and business leaders, community advocates and members of the general public are invited to these meetings to share ideas and priorities for growing the visitor industry.

During our recent discussions some consistent themes emerged, and I'd like to share them with you. We repeatedly heard about the need to create linkages in transportation, information and partnerships. There was also significant discussion regarding the need for innovation during the recent down economy and the importance of capitalizing on opportunities.

Creating Linkages

We've seen several recent advances in the local tourism product – the opening of the Nicholas Conservatory and Gardens, the expansion of the Discovery Center Museum and Burpee Museum of Natural History, the extension of the river walk at the Riverfront Museum Park, and the success of Rockford City Market and Friday Night Flix.

Now it's important to develop a means to move people to and from these wonderful assets. You told us you would like to find a way to link our hotels on the east side to these exciting new and improved attractions in the downtown area and connect the attractions with each other. Water taxis, trolleys and bus programs are just some of the suggestions brought forth to make our sites and attractions more accessible.

You also told us you want more ways to connect people with information. Rockford and our region offer high-quality and exciting things to do, unique restaurants and retail outlets you won't find anywhere else, and a value that beats big city prices. It's important that we communicate this to both visitors and locals. Frontline staff at hotels, attractions and restaurants can play a critical role in providing information about things to do and events and activities taking place each week.

We also heard about the growing need for new partnerships. Industry partners want to connect with each other to create marketing packages and new products that draw new visitors to the region. Rural partners want to make sure they have a seat at the table. Organizations and attractions are seeking new ways to work together to mutually grow.

Creating and Capitalizing on Opportunity

The recent economic challenges have led to innovative solutions and new opportunities. For example, Klehm Arboretum & Botanic Gardens sought to grow their customer base by adding regular dog walks, while Tinker Swiss Cottage Museum & Gardens found success hosting paranormal tours. These out-of-the-box ideas allowed the organizations to grow their exposure in different market segments, bringing in new clientele when they needed it most.

Many groups found strength in numbers by developing new partnerships. Great Gardens Rockford jointly marketed the area's gardens at regional consumer shows, while area arts organizations created Bike for the Arts (BART), a bicycle tour to raise funds and awareness for the arts community.

Several attendees also raised the importance of being open to opportunities that arise. Whether it's the chance to bring a casino to the Rockford Region or save a national treasure like the Laurent House, Rockford's only Frank Lloyd Wright home, we need to recognize potential opportunities and take action so these possibilities don't pass us by.

Looking Forward

This is the third year RACVB has held community roundtables. We see these discussions as a key part of our planning process. These sessions allow us to hear from stakeholders and citizens and open doors for greater

collaboration. While not every idea can be implemented, staff is working to identify and expand those that can help us efficiently grow tourism in the Rockford Region.

If you would like to stay up to date on developments within our visitor industry you can sign up for e-news updates by contacting kdecoaster@gorockford.com. To receive our weekly "What's Happening" email regarding events taking place in the Rockford Region each week, contact jjacobs@gorockford.com. You can also download our mobile application for your smart phone by visiting your app store and searching for Go Rockford.