

This week is National Travel and Tourism Week. As such, it's appropriate that we recognize the significant contributions visitors make in our region. Each year, visitors spend nearly \$300 million and support 3,000 jobs. At the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, we are focused on growing our economy by increasing tourism.

An additional \$16 million annually in visitor spending can strengthen our local economy when we upgrade and expand our sports infrastructure. And in the process, the Rockford Region will once again be first in the nation for hosting amateur sports tournaments.

The Reclaiming First sports tourism master plan created by a steering committee recommends that the former Ingersoll building in downtown Rockford be transformed into a multi-sport facility, Sportscore Two be upgraded with artificial turf and lights and the Indoor Sports Center be expanded.

The Rockford area can again be the undisputed national leader as the destination for amateur sports tournaments. Other communities captured some of this profitable business as they built newer and better facilities and we lost market share. But, Reclaiming First is an excellent plan to reclaim the leadership position and our citizens can enjoy new, world-class facilities that will primarily be paid for by visitors.

A steering committee, co-led by the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau and the Rockford Park District (RPD), recommended a funding package to finance improvements at Sportscore Two and Indoor Sports Center as well as convert the downtown "Ingersoll" building into a new, flexible, multi-sport indoor facility.

Visitors to Shoulder Most of Cost

Our citizens benefit from our sports facilities. However, our model has been that visitors help make these facilities possible for residents. The steering committee has proposed a countywide increase in the hotel tax of up to 2 percent could generate \$13 million. This proposal requires legislation from the Illinois General Assembly and then local government approvals.

Additional financing options include \$3.1 million from the State of Illinois River Edge Redevelopment Zone Program; \$4 million from the state's Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity; \$350,000 per year from the park district; \$500,000 in charitable contributions; \$50,000 per year in naming rights; an amusement tax, grants and contributions from local municipal governments and certain tax credits.

This project will benefit all of Winnebago County. That's why the steering committee recommended regional funding. Property taxes and general sales taxes would not be increased to fund the project.

What's Next?

Critical to the success of Reclaiming First is the leadership of our state legislative delegation. We thank them for working in a bipartisan manner to help move Reclaiming First forward. A bill is working its way through Springfield that would allow local authorities to increase the hotel tax described earlier. We are hopeful that this bill will be approved by May 31 when the legislature is scheduled to adjourn.

Construction could begin as early as the fall of 2012 with an opening in 2013 for the downtown complex and 2014 for the improved Sportscore Two and Indoor Sports Center. Please visit www.reclaimingfirst.org for more information on how our region can add \$16 million to our economy.

As the warm weather brings more tournaments to our region and you see young athletes at our hotels and restaurants, please welcome them. We appreciate the support we've received for Reclaiming First and we look forward to seeing the proposal move forward toward becoming a reality.

Linda Heckert, RACVB Board Chairman
John Groh, RACVB President/CEO