

NEWS RELEASE

Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau



Survey Shows County Residents Value Tourism

*Almost all respondents agree tourism has positive effect on economy
89.2% of Residents Support Reclaiming First*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 4, 2012

ROCKFORD, IL — Nearly all of Winnebago County residents believe tourism plays an important role in the region's economy. In a countywide survey, 94.4 percent of respondents say tourism is "important" or "very important" to the local economy.

Health Systems Research of the University of Illinois-Rockford conducted the survey for the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. The survey feedback is intended to help RACVB's Board of Directors and staff understand residents' thoughts and opinions about the importance of tourism and visitor industry related initiatives.

Importance of Visitors

According to the survey results, almost all respondents agree that tourism has a positive effect on the regional economy, with nearly two-thirds (63.7 percent) saying tourism's effect is strong enough to improve the economy, while an additional one-third (35.4 percent) contend that visitor spending has some positive benefit.

Investing in Tourism

More than three in four respondents (77.4 percent) believe more money should be invested to bring visitors to the Rockford area. Most agree that funding should come from businesses that benefit from tourism, such as hotels and restaurants, and from taxes or fees paid by visitors.

Support for Specific Tourism Projects

The survey presented residents with six much-talked-about initiatives. Two emerged as most important to the community: ecotourism and facilities for amateur sports tournaments.

- The highest support for amateur sports facilities comes from residents in the 61102 and 61101 zip codes, the Rockton and South Beloit areas, African American residents, and residents living in Machesney Park.

Connecting bike paths to rural and outlying areas ranked third, while adding attractive gateways and downtown revitalization were followed closely behind, respectively. A downtown convention center and hotel ranked the lowest among the six projects.

- The highest support for the continued revitalization of downtown Rockford comes from African American residents, residents in the 61103 zip code, those ages 18-39, residents who have lived in the county less than 10 years and those who live in zip code 61101.

When asked, **“what would make Rockford and Winnebago County more welcoming to visitors?”** overwhelmingly, more than any other topic, respondents suggest that the City of Rockford and surrounding areas be cleaned up. They noted as detrimental “cluttered”, “unkempt”, and “dirty” roadways and gateways, eyesores such as dilapidated homes and buildings, along with unsightly trash and litter. Respondents noted that trees and flowers beautify an area and should be abundant.

I would support more funding for...

Additionally, and of note,

- 65.7 percent of respondents noted they would support more funding to promote ecotourism such as nature/forest preserves, conservation, hiking and canoeing and,
- 62.7 percent of respondents noted that they would support more funding for maintaining and improving facilities for amateur sports.

“RACVB exists to improve the economy throughout Winnebago County, so it’s important that we understand the opinions of our residents countywide. As we reviewed the survey results we were pleased to learn that our residents appreciate and value the positive economic impact that visitors have on our economy,” said Linda Heckert, RACVB Board chairman. “Their feedback also helps us understand what tourism initiatives residents deem important. Knowing that 89 percent of our residents are supportive of the Reclaiming First initiative certainly validates the importance of moving quickly to bring these projects to completion.”

Heckert also noted that the insights gained from the survey, combined with feedback received from annual roundtable discussions held in the fall, will aid the bureau's board and staff as they set future goals and directions.

Surveys were randomly mailed, proportionate to zip codes, to 5,000 households in Winnebago County (1 in 20). Surveys were sent in March 2012, 686 surveys were returned, a 13.7 percent response rate. Survey responses were anonymous, and collected and analyzed by Heath Systems Research.

RACVB is a private, non-profit organization established in 1984 to champion efforts to promote the Rockford Region as an overnight visitor destination. The RACVB adds wealth to the region's economy by investing in marketing programs that grow tourism. www.gorockford.com

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