

Prepare Now for 2014

The visitor industry, downtown Rockford and the entire Rockford region face an exciting future. If we stay on course, the downtown sports complex called for in the *Reclaiming First* plan could open as early as the spring of 2014.

The opening of an indoor sports venue at the former riverfront Ingersoll building will transform Rockford from a seasonal sports town to a year-round destination and ensure we maintain our position as a leader in the amateur sports market.

It will also bring a few thousand players, coaches, parents and fans downtown more than 30 weekends a year. For the first time, downtown Rockford will be a regular destination for tournaments and groups, and we need to be ready.

When these visitors arrive downtown, how do we want to greet them? What sort of first impression do we want to make? Assuming we want those impressions to be positive and welcoming, we have much to accomplish over the next 18 months. While we have made great progress in recent years, we have much to accomplish. We can do it!

More Bustle

We need to view ourselves through the eyes of our visitors. They will judge our community through the lens of their experiences and expectations.

Downtown Rockford is showing signs of a sustained renaissance. City Market increased attendance by 46 percent this year to 57,000 people. Several of its vendors have, or soon will, open retail storefronts in downtown. The movies at Davis Park welcomed 20,000 people downtown. Dinner on the Dock added life and activity to the riverfront each Thursday night. Specialty festivals like Screw City Beer Fest and BART are creating a sense of excitement. And, ice-skating returns to Davis Park this winter.

But visitors – and our residents – expect and deserve more. Downtown needs to feel vibrant and bustling seven days a week, in every season. We need to ensure our experiences are connected, and that we don't have activity deserts with city blocks, sections of blocks or chunks of time that are vacant and empty.

More Music

Rockford has a rich and interesting music history. However, right now, we don't have a strong live music scene. One is trying to emerge, but we are not there yet. Other communities like Eau Claire, Wis. and Austin, Texas have been redefined because of their live music scene. Why not Rockford?

Imagine if you could find music at multiple venues, including bars, restaurants, cafes and theaters, seven days a week. Let's make that happen. Perhaps we can start with a regular singer/songwriter series.

More Art

Charlotte is popular for its Random Acts of Culture. You might happen upon the symphony performing in a public square, a painter in the lobby of city hall or a ballerina dancing on a pedestal at a busy intersection. This doesn't cost a lot of money.

Rockford lacks consistent public support for arts programming and art installations. Other cities have found innovative, sustainable ways to attack this. We can, too.

More Color

Rockford has been known by many names and slogans. For the past decade we've been celebrating our City of Gardens. We have amazing, signature gardens. Unfortunately, the vibrancy often stops at the garden gate.

Our public partners – the City of Rockford, Winnebago County, and other units of government – have been constrained in financial and staff resources. Despite their best intentions and efforts, they simply don't have the resources to maintain our public green spaces to a high standard, and it's started to show.

Earlier this year, RACVB partnered with the Park District and the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois on a flash-mob style greening project at a key intersection downtown. The results were dramatic and demonstrated what can happen with a few dollars and some hard work.

Spring 2014

As we look ahead to spring of 2014 and anticipate the opening of a downtown sports complex, there are many tasks to accomplish in order to be ready for the visitors that will come. What we do, and how we get there, is really up to us. But we need to start now or the visitors that come might not be compelled to return.

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