

A Successful Year

As we turn the calendar to a new year, it is time to reflect on the previous twelve months. The visitor industry in the Rockford region made great strides in 2012. We welcomed new events, celebrated milestones with returning customers and set ourselves up for a strong 2013.

Reclaiming First Announced

We started 2012 having just announced *Reclaiming First*. The master plan for sports facilities calls for the creation of an indoor sports complex along the Rock River in downtown Rockford and significant upgrades at Sportscore One and Two and the Indoor Sports Center.

In November, the City of Rockford and the Rockford Park District entered in to an agreement regarding ownership, funding and operation of the downtown indoor sports center. If all goes as planned, the facility will open in spring 2014.

A bill in Springfield authorizing Winnebago County to raise the hotel/motel tax to help fund the project should be called for a vote when the Legislature goes back into session, January 3 - 8. In the meantime, the Rockford Park District and City of Rockford, with assistance from RACVB, are working to select architecture and engineering firms that will work on the projects as soon as funding is finalized.

Visitor Spending tops \$300 Million

Figures released by the State of Illinois in August show visitors to Winnebago County spent the highest amount ever recorded. Visitor spending increased 11.8 percent in 2011, totaling more than \$311 million dollars. This was the first time expenditures topped the \$300 million mark since the pre-recession level of \$300.6 million in 2007.

Those visitors also supported more than 2,620 jobs in Winnebago County and provided \$5.07 million in local tax revenue.

ODP Returned

After a two-year absence, Rockford welcomed back the U.S. Youth Soccer Region II Olympic Development Program (ODP) Boys' Camps. The program, which is intended to identify future Olympic and college-level athletes, was drawn away from Rockford to a new, world-class soccer facility in Overland Park, Kan. in 2010 and 2011. Organizers returned the camp to Rockford for 2012 and 2013 because of the region's many offerings, commitment to customer service and location.

Milestone Returns

Several returning events recognized milestone anniversaries this year. The longevity of their relationships with the community serves as a testament to the warm welcome and customer service they receive.

Competitors have kicked up the dirt on the track in Rockford's Searls Park for 25 years at the BMX Midwest Nationals Competition. The event brings approximately 6,000 racers and fans to the region each year from all over the world.

The Illinois High School Association Girls Bowling State Championships returned for the 20th straight year. The tournament draws 1,300 competitors, coaches and spectators.

Wrestlers hit the mats at BMO Harris Bank Center for the 10th consecutive year. The Illinois Kids Wrestling Federation State Tournament brings nearly 1,500 athletes, coaches and spectators annually, who spend an estimated \$350,000 while in town. The event has committed to the Rockford region through 2014.

Celebrating Tourism

RACVB celebrated National Tourism & Travel Week in May with its annual breakfast meeting. At the meeting RACVB announced the creation of a board-designated innovation fund, named in honor of the bureau's founding president/CEO Wendy Perks Fisher.

The fund was established with an initial investment of \$100,000 and is designed to encourage innovation and new ideas that accelerate progress in our tourism industry. RACVB will work to grow that amount over time so it can replenish funds and allow for ongoing grant awards.

Looking To 2013

As we look at 2013, we expect this momentum to continue.

The Rockford region will host its first lacrosse tournament this year. The Rock River Cup, by NXTSports, will draw more than 3,000 players, coaches and fans to the region. They will fill an estimated 3,250 hotel room nights and spend an estimated \$585,000 during their stay. The tournament will help strengthen the Rockford region's position as a leading sports destination and will make the region a contender for similar events in the future.

The region will also welcome more than 125 travel journalists from around North America as part of Travel Media Showcase 2013. The tradeshow will fill approximately 1,000 hotel room nights. More importantly, having these journalists here will help spread the word about Rockford as they write about our community in blogs and publications throughout the country.

If we maintain our pace with Reclaiming First, construction should begin on the indoor sports facility this year. The project will not only bring new life to the former Ingersoll building, it will serve as a significant catalyst for downtown revitalization and transform our visitor industry landscape.

Getting here took hard work by many people, and we aren't done yet. But, by looking back at our progress, we know the journey is worth the effort. The visitor industry faces an exciting future and it is up to us to ensure its success.