

Tax enacted to fund area's sports tourism industry

Facility expansion plans soon to be realized

As we reflect on 2013, there is no better time to recognize partners and collaborators throughout the region that helped advance the tourism industry this past year and set the stage for future growth.

I've written several times about the region's Reclaiming First initiative, which is designed to increase the economic impacts of sports tourism. The effort took a giant step forward on November 26 when the Winnebago County Board voted unanimously to enact a countywide 2% hotel tax, beginning January 1. The proceeds of the tax will provide a significant portion of the funds needed to expand and modernize Sportscore Two and the Indoor Sports Center (ISC), as well as fund a portion of the new Downtown Sports Complex.

As you might recall, to enact this hotel tax we first needed to be granted authority by the State Legislature. The bipartisan Reclaiming First bill stalled many times as it made its way through the House and Senate, ultimately being signed by Governor Quinn on August 12. After that, we needed approval from local municipalities to allow the county board to enact the tax. We set up the process this way so it would only move forward if there was broad support behind the plan.

Over the past few months, the elected councils in Loves Park, Machesney Park, South Beloit, Rockton, Cherry Valley and Rockford each voted to authorize the County to enact the tax increase.

The support of these municipalities, along with the affirmative vote from the Winnebago County Board, demonstrates that our regional community and its elected officials value tourism and the economic activity it generates, and for that we are truly thankful.

Approximately 75% of the overnight visitor stays influenced by the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau are generated by sports tourism. As competition grows and new facilities are constructed elsewhere, we know it is important to invest in our sports infrastructure if we are going to regain the business we've lost, retain the business we have, and grow the amateur sports tourism market.

The new downtown sports facility will allow the region to capture a greater share of the sports tourism market. The facility will be equipped to host basketball, volleyball, wrestling, dance and more. The upgrades to Sportscore Two and ISC will add additional lighting, turf fields and other improvements that will make these facilities shine amongst our competitive set.

We expect Reclaiming First to increase visitor spending by \$16 million a year, create 400 jobs and generate \$1.9 million in new tax revenue. This is in addition to the \$326 million that visitor spent in Winnebago County in 2012, a number that has continued to trend upward since 2009.

Over the next few months, we will work to finalize the remaining funding sources needed to complete the projects. As that happens, our project team will work with architects and engineers to finalize plans for each of the facilities and then move in to construction phases, hopefully by mid-2014. As we enter 2014, I eagerly look forward to 2015 when we open these new and renewed facilities to our local citizens and visitors. Stay tuned for additional updates along the way.