

NEWS RELEASE

Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau



RACVB Reflects on 30 Years of Tourism Growth in Rockford Region and Casts Vision for the Next 30 Announcement of new sculpture project highlights celebration

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 6, 2015

ROCKFORD, IL — The Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau (RACVB) hosted its annual luncheon today with a celebration of the first 30 years of tourism in Rockford while also casting a vision for the next 30 years.

"The economic value of tourism to our region has grown to more than \$330 million annually, but what we are the most proud of is the enhanced quality of life that comes with it," RACVB President/CEO John Groh said. "Studies continue to show that when communities draw visitors, they also draw residents and business, which helps to fuel the engine of vitality."

The collective buy-in to form the RACVB in 1984 has proven fruitful as Winnebago County's tourism industry generates more than \$71 million in payroll, supported by \$330 million in visitor spending. Since 2011, the hospitality/leisure industry has led the Winnebago County Metropolitan Statistical Area as the fastest-growing sector in job creation with more than an 11 percent growth rate. For the Rockford MSA, leisure and hospitality jobs are at a record level with approximately 13,900 jobs, which accounts for 9.4 percent of total jobs in the market.

A panel discussion led by Groh was held to highlight several areas of vitality that will continue to enhance the community in the years to come. Highlights of the discussion centered on the continued revitalization of downtown Rockford, the efforts of making Rockford a Top 25 community, how new attractions enhance quality of life and how Rockford is a tremendous asset for the state of Illinois.

Guest panelists included:

- Mike Schablaske, Executive Director, Transform Rockford
- Daniel Jarrett, Owner/Operator, West Rock Wake Park
- Laura Narduzzi, Director of Hotel Operations, Gorman & Company
- Cory Jobe, Director, Illinois Office of Tourism

Tourism Hall of Fame

In keeping with the spirit of celebrating partners and visionaries, RACVB annually recognizes and inducts individuals and organizations into its Tourism Hall of Fame. This year, three groups were inducted for their service to the community: On the Waterfront, RACVB Board Chairs and RACVB Founding Partners.

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In celebration of RACVB's 30th Year, Groh announced last fall that a permanent tribute wall will be installed at RACVB's office recognizing the Hall of Fame inductees.

"Thirty years of success is predicated on the sustained leadership and support of not just individuals but the entirety of Winnebago County, the people and municipalities throughout," Groh said. "As our latest marketing initiative affirms, we are truly In Good Company, and we are delighted to honor so many today for their contributions to the tourism industry."

On the Waterfront was a community staple for 29 years and provided a great summer tradition for visitors and locals alike. The festival showcased Davis Park, the Rock River and downtown Rockford. In addition to their signature event, OTW produced other events and programs for the community and mentored countless festival and event organizers who have gone on to produce numerous additional community events. OTW utilized more than 4,000 volunteers each year, generated \$12 million annually in economic impact, and brought hundreds of thousands of people to downtown Rockford.

RACVB Board Chairs were honored for their combined 30 years of service to the organization. In all, there have been 13 board chairs who have helped to craft and shape the vision of the RACVB. Nine of the 13 board chairs were in attendance at the luncheon, the only such gathering of former board chairs in the organization's history.

- 1984-86 – Brian Blair
- 1986-89 – Vance Barrie
- 1989 – Mark Bonavia
- 1989-95 – Jim Pirages
- 1995-96 – John Nolte
- 1996-99 – Brian Brown
- 1999-2001 – Shawn Carney
- 2001-04 – Jeff Smith
- 2004-06 – Bob Rhea
- 2006-09 – Dr. Rena Cotsones
- 2009-11 – Mark Stefanic
- 2011-13 – Linda Heckert
- 2013-15 – Darrell Snorek

RACVB Founders were instrumental in the forming of the organization in 1984. In the early 1980s, Rockford and Winnebago County were in a severe recession, and we led the nation in unemployment. A number of strategic initiatives were created and carried out to correct the situation. Research showed that Rockford had little or no name recognition in the Chicago area, and we needed to market our region and ourselves. A public-private group of leaders thought that a central marketing group could be more successful, rather than individual hotels marketing themselves.

As part of the research to restore fiscal stability to the region, civic and business leaders visited other communities to learn best practices. There were many public-private partnerships that worked to establish and grow the visitors bureau. Although large cities like Chicago had long enjoyed the benefits of a visitors bureau, smaller cities like Rockford did not begin to have them until the 1980s.

The bureau was incorporated on September 27, 1984. Among the names on the articles of incorporation were Vance Barrie, representing the Rockford Park District; Dave Flynn, a restaurateur; Paul Logli, then an associate circuit court judge for Winnebago County; Martha Mitchell who was a hotelier; Carl Nelson, Brian Blair, Mark Bonavia, Carol Pollack, and Jody Cicio, who was the first staff member of the bureau.

Additional individuals, among others, who were key in the founding of the CVB include then Rockford Mayor John McNamara; Rex Parker who was the general manager of the Clock Tower Resort; Doug Logan, the first general manager of the MetroCentre; John Holub, then head of the Rockford Chamber of Commerce; Earl Palmer, who owned the Colonial Inn; Roy Fridh, owner of the Sweden House and Alpine Inn; and Webbs Norman, now retired executive director of the Rockford Park District.

RACVB Foundation & Public Sculpture Project Announced

Building on the success of the Forest City Beautiful initiative and the success of Stroll on State, RACVB is pleased to announce its first public sculpture initiative.

Patterned after the successful Seasons of Sculpture in Sarasota, Fla, (www.sarasotaseasonofsculpture.org) RACVB will bring world-class sculpture to downtown Rockford in 2015, with a long-term goal of creating a program that installs sculpture each year on a rotating basis. "For many years, Rockford has had excellent, world-renowned sculpture throughout the city – especially along the riverfront at Sinnissippi Park. This new pilot program will bring color, vibrancy and excitement to downtown Rockford through public sculpture," said Tana Vettore, RACVB director of destination development.

Five sculptures, created by artists Hans Van de Bovenkamp (www.vandebovenkamp.com) and Boaz Vaadia (www.vaadia.com), will be on loan to the community for one year. The pieces will be installed in late May. The artists and sculptures were vetted and approved by Rockford's Arts in the Parks group, which is led by local businessman and art collector Dick Behr. The committee also includes Tom Furst of Furst Search and representatives from the Rockford Art Museum, Rock Valley College, the Rockford Area Arts Council, Rockford University, Rockford Park District and RACVB.

RACVB and Forest City Beautiful are partnering with Mr. Behr to underwrite the costs for the exhibition. The pieces have most recently been on display at Illinois Wesleyan University in Normal, IL. The art has also been displayed in New York City and Sarasota, FL.

"We have seen such beauty already through the transformation of the downtown landscape and through the dedication of the volunteers and sponsors who have helped to launch Forest City Beautiful," Vettore said. "The sculpture project will continue to enhance the downtown streetscape and help to create a sense of place for our community."

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To support ongoing initiatives such as Stroll on State, Forest City Beautiful and public sculpture installations, RACVB's Board of Directors has authorized the establishment of the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau Foundation, a 501 (c) 3 organization that will serve as a supporting entity to RACVB.

"When we look at the tools in our toolkit, we recognize that RACVB is not able to accept charitable funds to support the work we are doing in community and destination development. This has limited our ability to raise needed dollars to support these worthy initiatives," said Groh. "Many destination marketing organizations like RACVB have established foundations to support their work. This is a natural next step as we lean further in to developing special events and programs that benefit the community."

Darrell Snorek, RACVB's outgoing board chairman, will serve as the first chairman of the new foundation, which will be established this month.

30 Years of Growth and Progress

Over the past 30 years our region's collective quality of life has been enhanced by the addition of more than 20 new attractions and 18 new hotels, not to mention many great locally owned restaurants and retail shops that have opened. Visitors play an important role in supporting these organizations and businesses.

New attractions include: Aldeen Golf Club & Practice Center, Anderson Japanese Gardens, Sportscore Two/Indoor Sports Center, the Laurent House by Frank Lloyd Wright, Klehm Arboretum & Botanic Garden, Davis Park, Riverfront Museum Park, Nygren Wetlands, Rockford City Market, as well as major expansions or renovations at institutions like Burpee Museum of Natural History, BMO Harris Bank Center and Coronado Performing Arts Center.

Sports Tourism Growth: Working with many partners, including the Rockford Park District, RACVB has led efforts to position the community as one of the country's top destinations for amateur sports. Each year, more than 150 sports tournaments draw visitors to the region.

Initially led by the original Sportscore complex, the region's sports tourism facility lineup now includes Sportscore Two, the Indoor Sports Complex, Harlem Community Center, Rockton Athletic Fields, several bowling centers, top-flight golf courses and the beautiful and wide Rock River. In 2016, the Reclaiming First improvements including a new 100,000 sq. ft. riverfront sports complex and expansion of Sportscore Two and the Indoor Sports Center will open.

The mission of the RACVB is to drive quality of life and economic growth for our citizens through tourism marketing and destination development. www.gorockford.com

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