

NEWS RELEASE

Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau



Winnebago County Residents Voice Value of Tourism Industry

*Survey indicates a sizable shift in perceptions of downtown Rockford, while
96% of residents see visitors as important to the local economy*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 8, 2015

Rockford, IL – Winnebago County residents expressed overwhelming support of the region's tourism industry, as demonstrated in their responses to a survey conducted by Health Systems Research of the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford. The Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau commissioned the survey.

A highlight of the survey is that 96 percent of respondents reported that tourism was "very important" or "important" to the overall economy of the region. In addition, 98 percent said tourism has a "positive effect to improve the economy" or a "positive effect through limited visitor spending." Both of these numbers have held strong since the last survey conducted in 2012.

"It is very encouraging to see that our residents value the role of its tourism industry and understand that tourism contributes to our economic well-being," RACVB President/CEO John Groh said. "The economic impact of the tourism industry has a tremendous influence on our collective quality of life."

The survey feedback is intended to help the RACVB Board of Directors and staff understand residents' thoughts and opinions about the importance of tourism and industry related initiatives.

Support for Specific Projects/Priorities

The survey respondents showed great support for several specific projects that would enhance the region:

- Ecotourism (including outdoor activities such as hiking, canoeing, biking) had 91 percent support;
- Amateur sports facilities had 90 percent support;
- Downtown Rockford revitalization had 84 percent support;
- Connecting and extending bike paths had 80 percent support;
- Attractive gateways into the community had 70 percent support; and
- A whitewater rapids course on the Rock River had 57 percent support, with 15 percent undecided.

Downtown Rockford Revitalization

One of the most significant findings of the study is a shift in opinion about downtown Rockford. Attitudes shifted between 2012 and today, with a sizable move in citizen support for downtown revitalization.

- In 2012, 45 percent of residents indicated support for "more funding" for downtown Rockford redevelopment. That jumped to 60 percent in the 2015 survey.
- Further, in 2012 when asked about whether or not downtown Rockford revitalization was important to the community, 26 percent said "yes, strongly agree" and 42 percent said "yes, agree" (68 percent). Today there are 53 percent who "strongly agree" and 32 percent who "agree" (85 percent).

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Quality of Life Measures

Survey respondents were also asked about the quality of life in the region. When asked if Rockford and Winnebago County's appearance and upkeep should be a high priority, 95 percent indicated yes (63 percent strongly agree and 32 percent agree). This is consistent with 2012 survey responses. Following up on this initial feedback, RACVB launched its Forest City Beautiful initiative in 2014, which aims to beautify downtown, with a goal of expanding citywide in 2017.

Nearly three quarters of the respondents are pleased with Winnebago County and Rockford as a place to live and 65 percent say the community is headed in the right direction.

"During our survey in 2012, citizens voiced their desire to see the Reclaiming First initiatives such as the downtown sports complex become a reality and now three years later we just celebrated the start of that facility's construction," Groh said. "We will take the responses to this year's survey seriously and look forward to what advances there are in store for the tourism industry in the future."

The survey was conducted anonymously with no identifiers on the survey or the return envelope. Surveys were sent to 6,000 Winnebago County addresses, or roughly 1 in 18 households, which were selected at random to ensure representation from each zip code within the county. Citizens also had the option to complete the survey online at www.gorockford.com. The survey was completed from January 22 – February 28, 2015.

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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