

NEWS RELEASE

Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau



Visitors Spending Up 6.3% in Rockford Region; Growth Outpaces State Average and Other Metro Regions Attendance at sites, events and attractions exceeds 7.6 million

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 30, 2015

ROCKFORD, IL – Visitors to Winnebago County spent \$340 million at area businesses in 2014, the largest amount on record. That level of spending is a 6.3 percent increase over the prior year and is the highest percentage increase in any of the state's metro regions.

Attendance to sites, attractions and events in Winnebago County also grew in 2014. The region's tourism attractions and events welcomed 7,604,578 guests in 2014, an increase of 2.9 percent or about 300,000 visits.

"These numbers show that Rockford's appeal as a place to visit is growing. Word is getting out and folks are not only taking notice, they are taking action and traveling to the region," said John Groh, president and CEO of the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau – the region's destination marketing and management organization.

The \$340 million spent by visitors generated \$5.57 million in local tax receipts – funds that help local governments pay for services residents rely on – a 6.1% increase. In addition, tourism in Winnebago County supported 2,700 jobs in the hospitality sector, generating nearly \$75 million in payroll. State tax coffers were filled with \$18.94 million, a 7.3% increase. The Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity's Office of Tourism announced the economic figures today during an event at Rockford's Prairie Street Brewhouse.

"When you hear that our increases outpaced growth in every metro region of the state, we think that's impressive and worth celebrating, said RACVB Board Chair Bobbie Holzwarth. "Our region's focus on tourism has resulted in sustained economic growth. The steps RACVB is taking and the investments public and private partners are making ensure that this growth will continue in years to come."

In 2014, the State of Illinois hosted more than 109.4 million visitors, an increase of 3.5 percent over 2013, generating more than \$36.3 billion in travel expenditures. This marks the fourth consecutive year of record-breaking tourism industry numbers for the state.

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“The ongoing increase in visitors to Illinois demonstrates that both leisure and business travelers are considering Illinois a premier travel destination, providing a direct economic benefit for communities across the state,” said Cory Jobe, Director of the Illinois Office of Tourism. “These numbers are a true testament that the industry’s efforts to support and promote travel to Illinois are paying off, year after year.”

While in Rockford, Jobe highlighted two new marketing initiatives to promote Illinois’ unique travel offerings – the launch of *Enjoy*, a newly formatted, bi-annual Illinois leisure travel magazine designed to inspire travel with featured content and unique experiences; and the Illinois Made program. Illinois is full of inventors, artists, performers, innovators, pioneers and makers. Illinois Made will showcase and celebrate these makers, their passion for what they do and the positive impact they’ve made on the people and culture of the state.

Attendance and Visitor numbers up in Winnebago County

In addition to the economic impact numbers announced by the IOT, Groh announced strong growth in attendance for sites, attractions and events in Winnebago County for 2014. The region’s tourism attractions and events welcomed 7,604,578 guests in 2014, an increase of 300,000 people over the prior year.

Individual event attendance in the region grew from 2013, with a 133,597 increase; as event attendance was reported at 928,842 in 2014 versus 795,245 in 2013. That growth is thanks in large part to the Rockford AirFest returning after a one-year hiatus (in 2013) and the increased second-year attendance for Stroll on State.

The Top 5 attractions in the Rockford Region in 2014 were:

- 1) Sportscore Complexes / Indoor Sports Center – 2,867,173
- 2) Rock Cut State Park – 1,059,183
- 3) Ice Facilities (Carlson & Riverview) – 477,590
- 4) BMO Harris Bank Center (includes IceHogs) – 292,210
- 5) Forest Hills Baseball Diamonds – 280,000

The Top 5 Events in the Rockford Region in 2014 were:

- 1) Rockford AirFest – 135,000
- 2) Fourth of July Celebration – 125,000
- 3) Winnebago County Fair – 93,000
- 4) Stroll on State – 60,000
- 5) Festival of Lights – 45,000

“Once again, Rockford’s designation as ‘Sportstown USA’ lives up to the name,” said Groh. “Sports tourism has a major impact on our region and will only continue to rise thanks to the soon to be open Sportscore Downtown and expanded Sportscore Two.”

2014 Winnebago County Tourism Highlights

In addition to the 300 sports tournaments and other events and conferences influenced by RACVB, the following events added economic impact to the local economy.

- “Rockford AirFest 2014: Let the Thunder Roll” event brought more than 135,000 to the Chicago Rockford International Airport on June 7-8. The AirFest featured the USAF Thunderbird Demonstration Team and the U.S. Army Golden Knights.

- The region hosted many sports tournaments, such as the annual Puma Cup, USSSA Softball and the Olympic Development Program Soccer Camps and Tournament, and attracted more than 2.8 million local and out of town players, coaches and fans over the 2014 year at the Sportscore complexes.
- The Rockford City Market season attracted more than 75,000 attendees despite having two weeks cancelled due to inclement weather.
- The Rockford IceHogs remained a strong draw for visitors to the downtown and its host arena, bringing in 183,753 ice hockey fans.
- The Nicholas Conservatory and Gardens attendance increased by 10,000, up to 46,910 in attendance.
- The Prairie Street Brewhouse Dinner on the Dock, Anderson Japanese Gardens' Tuesday Evening in the Gardens, Old Settlers Days and the Head of the Rock Regatta all saw increases in attendance.
- The 2nd annual "Stroll on State" doubled its attendance from 2013. This holiday celebration brought 60,000 to this event versus 30,000 in 2013. The event earned the title "Best in Show" in 2014 at the Illinois Governor's Conference on Travel & Tourism.

For a full listing of regional Sites and Attractions numbers, go online to <http://www.gorockford.com/about-us/organizational-reports/>

Economic impact figures are calculated by D.K. Shifflet and Associates and the Illinois Office of Tourism, a state agency. Attendance figures are self-reported to RACVB by sites/attraction and events managers.

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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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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