

Visitors Spent \$340 Million; New Tourism Record!

Good news! Visitors added \$340 million to our local economy in 2014, the most ever spent by tourists visiting Winnebago County. That's a 6.3 percent increase over the prior year of \$320 million. Who benefits? Hotels, restaurants, shops and other large and small businesses, as well as municipalities that gain additional tax revenue and hospitality jobs that generate payroll.

These outstanding results were released on July 30 by Director of the Illinois Office of Tourism Cory Jobe when he came to Rockford to announce the record-breaking local and statewide economic impact numbers.

"Tourism Keeps Us Alive" says Hampton Inn/Hilton Garden Inn GM

Seth Frisbee, general manager of Rockford's Hampton Inn and Hilton Garden Inn, said "Honestly, tourism keeps us alive. During the week we have our business clients, but we also need the weekends filled, and that's where tourism comes in. Half the hotels wouldn't be here without tourists." The two hotels have a combined staff of 80 full-time equivalent employees.

Hotels in Winnebago County had a good year in 2014. Room nights sold were up 16 percent over 2013, with 647,000 room nights sold, up from 558,000 in 2013. Local hotel revenue was up 20 percent in 2014 from 2013, with \$53 million in sales, up from \$45 million.

In the related beverage industry, Darrell Snorek, LaMonica Beverages vice president-sales and past chairman of the RACVB board of directors, said, "When visitor traffic goes up, sales also increase with our beer and other beverage products like bottled water and energy drinks."

Visitors Mean 3,000 Jobs; Fast-Growing Industry

In addition to adding much-needed revenue, visitors mean jobs at hotels, restaurants and other related businesses such as attractions and arts organizations. In recent years, the hospitality industry has accounted for nearly 3,000 jobs in Winnebago County.

The "leisure and hospitality" industry is the third fastest-growing segment after "manufacturing" and "professional/business services," out of 14 industries in Winnebago/Boone counties, according to the Economic Development District of Northern Illinois.

The \$340 million that visitors spent here also generated \$75 million in payroll, up 5.2 percent from the prior year. The local tax revenue was \$6 million, up 6.1 percent.

Attendance Also Up

Each year we report attendance at local sites, attractions and events. Total attendance was up in 2014 over 2013, with 7.6 million in 2014 compared to 7.4 million in 2013. The top sites were Sportscore One and Two with an attendance of 2.9 million, while the top event was AirFest with 135,000 people.

What's Next?

The RACVB continues to advocate for the development of new products and additional infrastructure with our partners to help attract more visitors to the region. Examples include the Sportscore Downtown, expansion at Sportscore Two and the new downtown hotels.

I want to remind Chamber members that with the current state budget stalemate in Illinois, tourism's statutorily mandated funding from the state has been cut. We do not know what state funds we will have to market and promote the Rockford area over the next year.

We've had to cancel or shorten ad campaigns and other sales efforts. This is a devastating blow to our efforts to attract visitors to Rockford and the \$340 million they leave behind with local businesses, perhaps your business.

Please go to <http://tinyurl.com/ILtourism> to send an electronic letter to Governor Rauner and your elected officials, to ask them to continue the statutorily mandated funding for tourism. Thank you for your continued support of the visitor industry in the Rockford Region.

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