

October 2015 VOICE Column from RACVB John Groh

Large or Small, Public/Private Partnerships Add Vitality, Energy and Visitors

Are you ready for some IceHogs hockey? The popular and successful minor league affiliate of the Chicago Blackhawks (three-times-in-six-seasons Stanley Cup champs) plays their season-opener home game on October 17 at the BMO Harris Bank Center in downtown Rockford.

Attendance at their games continues to show strong growth; it was more than 4,800 per game at last count. In addition to the Rockford area, fans come from McHenry County and the greater Chicago area. In our business, we call them “visitors!” In 2014, the IceHogs’ economic impact was more than \$3 million, according to the team. Chamber members know that total visitor spending in Winnebago County for 2014 was \$340 million, so part of that is due to the impressive IceHogs.

IceHogs General Manager Mark Bernard said, “The IceHogs have had a tremendous impact on Rockford, being a consistent factor in growing businesses downtown like bars and restaurants, and creating local business.”

BMO Harris Bank Center was built as the MetroCentre in 1981 at a cost of \$16 million, much of it paid for by state funds. In 2003 a \$3.8 million grant from the State of Illinois and a \$23 million renovation in 2006 helped update the venue. In addition, the City of Rockford annually invests in the operation of the center, along with the Coronado Performing Arts Center and Davis Park.

Other Public/Private Partnership Successes

Thinking about the significant economic impact of the Rockford IceHogs, owned by the City of Rockford, made me think of other public/private partnerships we enjoy as community assets, and how important it is to continue these types of partnerships.

Rockford City Market is phenomenally vibrant public/private collaboration. The Rock River Development Partnership produces the market in collaboration with the City of Rockford and the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. Begun in 2010, City Market welcomed 20,000 visitors with 40 vendors. It ended 2014 with 75,000 visitors and an economic impact of \$8.7 million at the market and at downtown businesses. At least half a dozen vendors have expanded their businesses to a storefront.

And what about events like Screw City Beer Fest or the holiday celebration of Stroll on State? These events, and others like them, benefit from investments made by the City of Rockford. For example, Screw City Beer Fest takes place on the intentionally designed festival zone along Main Street. Stroll on State happens throughout downtown Rockford and is executed after careful planning and coordination with City staff members. During Stroll’s first year, nearly 30,000 people dined, shopped and were entertained by live performances at the free family festival. The 2014 event drew 60,000 people, thanks to more than 700 volunteers, partners and sponsors. Stroll returns this year on Saturday, November 28.

Data Support Need for More Family-Friendly Type Activities

Locally, we have data that our residents want to make our region more welcoming to visitors by having more “amusements, activities, entertainment” such as “unique attractions, sports, outdoor activities, free/low-cost activities, festivals, family-friendly events, big events, musical events and concerts.” This was one of the outcomes of the 2015 Citizen Survey commissioned by RACVB.

On a larger scale, Oxford Economics released a major analysis of the visitor industry that analyzed data of 237 Metropolitan Statistical Areas over a 20-year period. One highlight of the study was that cities with a higher concentration of visitor-related industries and amenities tend to grow faster than the average community. Also, higher levels of leisure visits positively affect population growth and employment growth at the local level.

So whether the public/private partnerships support and enhance cozy street fairs or large-scale venues and events with throngs of fans, let’s keep activating our streets and neighborhoods for both residents and visitors. That’s a sure sign of a healthy community, and is representative of the type of community I think we all want to live in.

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