

## Growing Travel Grows Jobs Travel & Tourism Week promotes the power of travel

By John Groh

Most people are likely familiar with the frequently touted (and research-proven) positive effects of travel on our work performance, relationships and personal well-being. RACVB promoted the valuable use of vacation time earlier this year as we celebrated Project Time-Off with communities throughout the state and encouraged visitors and residents to explore Illinois.

It's travel's economic power, though, that arguably deserves more attention.

Travel is a top-10 employer in 49 states and the District of Columbia. Spending by travelers everywhere in the U.S., which currently totals over \$990 billion annually, supports 15.3 million American jobs. That's **one in nine Americans** whose employment depends on a healthy travel industry. And in Winnebago County and Rockford, the travel industry now supports more than 2,800 jobs and pumps more than \$350 million into the economy.

In May, travel industry workers across the country are celebrating the 34<sup>th</sup> annual **National Travel and Tourism Week, May 7-13**. This year's theme, "Faces of Travel," highlights the people behind our nation's travel industry—and the need to craft smart, travel-friendly policies that keep their jobs flourishing.

Here in Rockford, we will be working closely with our partners to showcase the Rockford region throughout the week and get ready for the busy summer travel season. We anticipate that some newer events will continue to see gains in attendance numbers such as the popular Rockford Town Fair (June 1-4) and Tough Mudder (August 26-27).

Policies that protect and promote travel—from improvements to our roads and airports, to safely keeping America's doors open to international visitors—are necessary for the health of our country. Travel played a major role in America's post-recession economic recovery; according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the industry has recovered far faster than other economic sectors since 2008. Travel is also our country's number one service export, accounting for 11.2 percent of all U.S. exports in 2016.

Modernizing our travel infrastructure, particularly our airports, is one critical step. Not a single U.S. airport is ranked in the top 25 in the world. This is partly due to the financing structure that funds improvement projects at major airports, which has not been altered since 2000. If that were corrected, airports could modernize our World War II-era air traffic control system, make much-needed safety updates, and add gate space—which would spur competition among airlines by allowing more carrier options, improving prices and service for customers.

Strengthening the Visa Waiver Program (VWP), as well, would both boost our economy and improve security for all travelers in the U.S. The program allows pre-screened and pre-approved travelers from 38 of America's closest and most trusted allied countries to enter the U.S. without

a visitor visa. The VWP not only strengthens diplomatic relations and security standards, but VWP traveler spending also generates \$190 billion in U.S. economic output each year.

Travel makes a difference in our communities and lives every day. As we celebrate the impact of travel this week, let your favorite local sites and attractions know how much they mean to you and the quality of life in the Rockford region!