

Forest City Beautiful Enhances the Community

By John Groh

RACVB has lived by a mantra for the past few years as we market and showcase our great community. It's a mantra that puts the focus on building up, reinvigorating and enhancing the city through a coordinated destination development approach that improves the quality of life for everyone. The phrase is simple: "A place people want to visit is a place people want to live."

This approach began in 2013 when we launched our first RACVB-produced festival Stroll on State. The success of Stroll catapulted the next endeavor, our Forest City Beautiful initiative. Launched in 2014, Forest City Beautiful has focused on creating dynamic streetscapes throughout the downtown core. The plan was conceived to help improve the parking lots and public spaces in the downtown become more attractive and inviting for visitors and residence as they stroll. As we recognized that there was increased traffic downtown thanks to events like Rockford City Market and the construction of the UW Health Sports Factory, we felt it important to focus on these efforts to create an overall inviting experience.

Additional beautification came from the amazing public art display featuring world renowned artists, Boaz Vaadia and Hans Van de Bovenkamp. The popular sculptures were on loan to the community for two years and became a part of the downtown landscape. Sadly, our time with the sculptures had to end and they were shipped to New York City this past May; however, our staff continues to explore future public art opportunities.

Forest City Beautiful is supported by the generous donations of individuals and organizations in the community. RACVB seeded the initial 3-year pilot program with \$80,000 from its board-designated Wendy Perks Fisher Fund for Innovation and from an initial commitment of \$110,000 from the City of Rockford. In addition to seed funding, more than \$216,000 has been raised to support the multi-year beautification effort, including four large grants from the Northern Illinois Community Foundation. Along with monetary donations, there was a commitment from the community as more than 2,500 Sharefest volunteers gave their time and talents to this project in the summer of 2014 and 2015, and a partnership with the River District Association has helped to secure grant dollars for the program.

As we enter year four of the program, the RACVB is excited to announce:

- A new downtown site is being improved as Lot 5 (SE corner of State and Church Streets) will have landscape enhancements. The professionally designed space will include trees, perennials, annual flowers along with cement pads and electric for future up lighting enhancements and food vendors.
- Five outdoor, colorful bistro tables and chairs will become new additions to the downtown at Eddie Green Place and at Lot 4 next to the new Jimmy Johns.

- Twenty-nine new waste receptacles will be added to downtown along State Street between 3rd Street and Church Streets. Older waster receptacles will be repurposed on side streets downtown for added utilization.
- A new Beautification Recognition program will be launched soon – stay tuned!
- A planned expansion of the Forest City Beautiful program is in the works as we begin to branch out into the community. Built on the success implemented downtown, we hope to have plans in place to aid the Midtown District, South Main Street and the I-90/State Street interchange area.

Everyone wins when a city blossoms! Our recent Paint the Town Green fundraiser at Klehm Arboretum and Gardens helped to raise funds for this program, but we continue to need additional support. If your business is interested in learning how you can support these efforts, please contact me at igroh@gorockford.com.