Beautification and Public Art efforts continue to Bloom

By John Groh

This past January, I teased in this publication a new pilot program to further build on the Forest City Beautiful efforts aimed to beautify the Rockford region. And as of last month, we have announced the new program, **Business is Blooming,** which exists to build a culture of community involvement and visually appealing environments for our city. The program supports and acknowledges the positive values and efforts displayed by our business owners to make Rockford a beautiful and enjoyable place to live, work and play. For our RACVB Board and staff, rewarding activity that strengthens civic pride is one of the vital links to long-term success in the Rockford region.

Since 2013, the Forest City Beautiful program has raised $500,000 in public and private money to help beautify and update the streetscapes and landscapes in our community. As the program has matured, we are evolving to continue that success and to encourage our partners to take active roles in the process.

To get the ball rolling for Business is Blooming, we sent a team of judges to look at the exterior grounds of selected businesses in the River District Association, Midtown District and Coronado Haskell Neighborhood Association. Out of 23 businesses, six were chosen as "Businesses of Distinction" in select categories: Small Business (1-10 employees) The Loc Shop and Community Foundation of Northern Illinois; Large Business (26+ employees) Holmstrom & Kennedy; Restaurant Outdoor Dining: Abreo and Prairie Street Brewing Company; and Special Recognition Woodfire Brick Oven Pizza.

The selected businesses will be shining examples for the Business is Blooming contest that will be held in and voted on in July 2018. Business owners are encouraged to visit forestcitybeautiful.com/bloom to get more information about the program and to register to participate.

The goal is to recognize and incentivize businesses, organizations and property owners to improve the landscaping and facades of their buildings and properties; promote year-round activity/maintenance such as proper snow removal at businesses for customer access as well as lush summer landscapes and weed-free, litter-free environments. Outstanding or innovative beautification achievements will be selected and rewarded.

Rain Art Returns with a Splash

As part of the Forest City Beautiful initiative, we also launched version 2.0 of Rockford Rain Art with the help of Rockford Community Partners, River District, Midtown District, Miracle Mile and Swedish American Hospital. The program was well received in 2016 and we were encouraged to bring this whimsical public art program back to the community for a second year. The great thing about this project is that it is low cost but has big impact! In fact, Expedia.com included Rockford and the rain art project in their "Most Beautiful Towns in All 50 States" column this past spring.

The article stated: "Rockford is certainly a catch. Whether you're picking honey crisp apples at Curran's Orchard or doting on the intricate Tinker Swiss Cottage Museum & Gardens, you're in for a treat when you explore this Midwest city. But if tut, tut, it looks like rain, don't worry, it won't put a damper on your sightseeing; Rockford Rain Art has a genius installation, in which artwork magically appears on wet sidewalks in certain parts of town!"

You can download a map of the Rain Art locations at www.gorockford.com/rainart.

And speaking of public art, I must give a "shout out" to the tremendous work done by Nicholas Conservatory this year with their exhibit Bruce Monroe: LIGHT. The acclaimed artist's work in Rockford has garnered attention from USA Today and Chicago Magazine among others. The large installation of lights has been magical to see glowing along the Rock River all summer long. Don't miss your opportunity to stop by before the exhibit ends on Nov. 5.

It goes to show you that strategic efforts on both a large and small scale can have tremendous impact on how visitors and residents view our community.