

NEWS RELEASE

Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau



RACVB keeps its eye on the prize and inspires community to Think BIG, Then ACT!

*Optimism, authentic story-telling ideas and recent tourism
accomplishments take center stage at RACVB annual luncheon*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 23, 2018

Rockford, IL – The Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau inspired guests to **Think BIG, Then ACT** and celebrated major tourism accomplishments for the community on **Wednesday, May 23, 2018**, during the organization’s annual luncheon. The luncheon took place in the recently renovated **Cliffbreakers Riverside Hotel & Conference Center**.

When it comes to marketing cities as tourist destinations, the name of the game is storytelling, said **Melissa Luebbe, publisher of Midwest Living, in her keynote address**.

“You could call it marketing, but when it’s done really well, marketing is telling a story,” Luebbe said at the event, which attracted an audience of **nearly 325** to the newly renovated ballroom at Cliffbreakers.

“Remember,” she told the audience, “we buy with our hearts.” Logos of familiar products flashed on the screen behind her. Macintosh. Starbucks. Nike. Harley-Davidson.

“We talk about connecting with a visitor’s emotions,” she said. “It’s connecting with them at dozens of touchpoints – many of which occur at Rockford’s key attractions and off-the-beaten-path locations – and many of which occur before a tourist has even made it to the Rockford area.”

Some elements of creating the “emotional connection,” she said, are identifying your city’s unique appeal, telling your history in an interesting way, creating attractive gateways, being a great host and building attractions that create a buzz and draw people in.

The Rockford region has been telling its story in numerous ways, including through the video series called “Our City, Our Story,” created by local filmmaker Pablo Korona and funded by RACVB and Woodward. Luncheon guests enjoyed two of the videos during the event.

Also, RACVB has successfully partnered with Development Counsellors International (DCI), a national public relations firm, to push out positive stories to national media outlets. Those efforts have resulted in

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more than **20 positive stories** in the last year in such national outlets as **USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, Fox Business, CNN Money and Industry Week**. Those stories have reached **1.3 billion people** with positive narratives surrounding Rockford's quality of life assets, economic success, community members and initiatives.

In his report on the state of tourism in the region, RACVB President/CEO John Groh said the success story is compelling. With the exception of Cook County, Winnebago County is the fastest growing tourist destination in the state. Visitors spent more than **\$350 million** (the largest amount on record) last year in Winnebago County. That money supported almost **3,000 jobs** and a payroll of almost **\$86 million**.

There were **8,361,441 guests** who visited attractions and events in Winnebago County in 2017. The most-visited locations were the sports complexes, which last year attracted almost **3 million people** to attend or participate in events.

The theme of the luncheon, **Think BIG, Then ACT**, was emphasized by a large (10' x 7'11") composition book in which luncheon guests were invited to write **BIG IDEAS** for the region. Guests received regular-size **BIG IDEA** composition books to take with them.

Groh told attendees to use the books to record their own ideas.

"If you wait for earth-shattering ideas to occur to you, those pages will remain blank," he said. "Use this book for ideas that are half-baked. Write down the absurd and the impossible. Put into words ideas whose time hasn't yet come.

"You never know when circumstances will expose the potential in a previously impossible dream."

For instance, given the Hilton Embassy Suites and Rockford Conference Center project now underway on a site adjacent to Davis Park, it now makes sense to move ahead with a strategic plan for the park.

The strategic plan was developed by a city-appointed committee in 2015 and 2016.

Making news at the RACVB event, Rockford Mayor Tom McNamara appointed RACVB as the lead agency for the Davis Park project, and he named Groh to chair a 20-member task force to implement the plan. Concepts recommended by the original committee include such features as a splash pad that converts to an ice rink in winter, a sunning beach, public docks, a sculpture garden, attractive gateways and greenspaces, and much more.

"Every member of the task force is enthusiastic about this project and just as eager as I am to get started," Groh said. "We will identify priorities and evaluate funding options. Our ultimate goal is to move this plan to completion."

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RACVB's Annual Luncheon was supported by generous local organizations and businesses in the community. Gold Sponsors were Illinois Bank & Trust, Gorman & Company, Inc., and City of Rockford. Silver Sponsors were Swedish American, a division of UW Health, Fehr Graham and Event Floral.

The mission of the RACVB is to drive quality of life and economic growth for our citizens through tourism marketing and destination development. www.gorockford.com

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