

Rockford Chamber VOICE Article – June 2018

What's your big idea? Many are becoming reality in our region

By John Groh

We had much to celebrate and announce at RACVB's annual luncheon recently. Our theme was THINK BIG, THEN ACT.

We have so many reasons to be optimistic about the future of our region because people are thinking big and acting accordingly. For starters, our event was held at Cliffbreakers. It was exciting to see several hundred people attend an event at this incomparable venue on the Rock River. Cliffbreakers, which could accommodate events for more than 1,000 people in its glory days, is experiencing an impressive renewal on a big idea that began in 1993.

Our optimism only begins there. Other projects that will enter the mix soon include: The Hilton Embassy Suites and Rockford Conference Center downtown; the indoor City Market on Madison Street; three new Urban Equity developments downtown; and, in the longer term, anticipated development by local owners on the former Clocktower site.

These projects, while not RACVB initiatives, present opportunities for us for marketing and promotion. Together, these projects create an energy that leads me to believe the region is experiencing a breakthrough. I believe Rockford is one degree of separation from renaissance. A couple of degrees, at most.

When big ideas occur and are acted on simultaneously throughout the community, we will be propelled toward the kind of city we deserve to be. It's all about raising our sights.

That's what we try to do every day at RACVB -- raise the bar and ask: "What's next?"

Stunning success numbers

I want to share some numbers that bolster my conviction that our region is heading in the right direction. According to the U.S. Travel Association, tourism here is up 39 percent since the recession. In fact, outside of Cook County, Winnebago County is the fastest-growing tourist destination in Illinois.

Last year, visitors spent more than \$353 million in the county! Visitor spending supports almost 3,000 jobs and a payroll of \$86 million. Money spent by visitors for food, lodging, entertainment and recreation generated more than \$25 million in state and local taxes. Additionally, property taxes from hotels, restaurants and retail shops are paid to local government entities, supporting important services residents rely on.

On top of this good news, recent numbers show our hotel occupancy rate of 71 percent was the highest in the region and growing faster than anywhere else in 2017.

And here's a stunning stat: Our three major sports complexes are attracting 3 million individuals – a mix of local people and visitors – each year! That astounding statistic reinforces the importance of the Reclaiming First initiative, which improved the Sportscore facilities and made the UW Health Sports Factory possible.

A changing role

Today's tourism bureaus are doing more than promoting existing destinations, and the RACVB has been on the leading edge of the trend for many years. Beyond destination promotion, bureaus are now actively building, creating and designing destinations to attract visitors and improve quality of life for residents.

In keeping with this part of our role, Rockford Mayor Tom McNamara has designated RACVB to be the lead agency to advance the re-development of Davis Park into a mixed-use, modern urban gathering space. Development will be carried out alongside construction of the Hilton Embassy Suites and Rockford Conference Center, which is underway on the adjacent site in downtown Rockford.

Meanwhile, we had a cool giveaway at the annual luncheon, and we have a few extras if you missed the luncheon and really want one. It is a composition book like the ones you used in high school and college. The cover reads: "Hey, You. What's your BIG IDEA?"

We want you to use it to record your big ideas for yourself, your workplace or our city. If we can help you accomplish your big ideas on any level, let us know. You're welcome to call ahead (815.963.8111) to make sure we have books left, and then, stop by to pick one up.

John Groh is president/CEO of the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. 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

The views expressed are Groh's and do not necessarily represent those of the Rockford Chamber of Commerce.

