

## **Rockford Chamber Voice Column – July 2018**

### **Making our Forest City beautiful**

**By John Groh**

When company's coming, many folks run to the store to buy flowers for the table. You bring out the good china. We dispense of clutter, cut the grass and make sure everything's spit-and-polish clean.

Maybe you step back to survey our efforts and think: "Wow. I should do this for myself, not just for guests." It's true. The everyday appeal of our surroundings affects how we feel about ourselves and about where we live.

Rockford is a beautiful city, replete with picturesque parks, scenic rivers, attractive neighborhoods and public and private spaces where great attention is paid to how things look. But "fast backward," so to speak, about five years. Not so long ago, our downtown "selfie" left something to be desired aesthetically.

Bleak public spaces and mismatched planters – some sporting crops of mismatched weeds – didn't exactly boost our collective self-esteem. The appearance of downtown did little to support efforts toward "attracting top talent" to our city, which is the focus of this month's Voice.

In 2014, RACVB launched Forest City Beautiful with funds from its board-designated Wendy Perks Fisher Fund for Innovation and with generous support from the City of Rockford. Over the past five years, beautification efforts have been expanded tremendously with support from many community donors and volunteers.

You can't miss the results: huge flowerpots all over downtown teeming with lush greenery and colorful blossoms; professional landscaping around parking lots; park benches and bistro sets that make previously unremarkable public spaces welcoming. New signage helps residents and visitors find their way around, and we've added more trash receptacles to keep our streets and public spaces litter free.

And did you see the nine sculptures that were on loan to the city and displayed downtown from 2015 to 2017? Donors who believe in public art funded that very popular sculpture project, and they are doing it again.

By now, installation has begun for 13 sculptures that will be featured downtown and beyond for the next two years. These sculptures are the work of Midwest artists. We asked for public support at an event in early June and the response was immediate and overwhelming. Thanks to everyone who helped make the sculpture initiative happen again.

RACVB also sponsors the Business is Blooming competition that recognizes local businesses for their efforts to make Rockford a beautiful and enjoyable place to live, work and play. Criteria include well-maintained landscaping, overall cleanliness and attractiveness, creativity of design, color and signage, along with other elements. Last year RACVB recognized six businesses for excellence.

There's more to be done, and we need more sponsors for specific beautification initiatives and more volunteers to keep our efforts moving in the right direction. Every year, we raise funds to

maintain what we're already doing, and the push is on now to expand efforts beyond downtown and to beautify our city's gateways.

The major fundraiser for Forest City Beautiful is "Paint the Town Green," and this year, we have something truly special planned. On Friday, July 13, we'll present a Vintage Circus at Klehm Arboretum & Botanic Garden. Guests will thrill to the show-stopping aerial antics of Aloft Circus Performers from Chicago and enjoy interesting side shows, food and drink, all in the cirque theme.

Please contact me if you are interested in helping with any of the current beautification efforts or if your company is doing something notable that we should know about.

Rockford's 2018 "selfie" is a far cry from the snapshot of just five years ago. What a difference a few – or a few thousand – flowers, plants and shrubs make in the table we set for ourselves, as well as for our guests.

*John Groh is president/CEO of 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](http://www.gorockford.com)*

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