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Good news for Rockford – Visitor spending reaches all-time high

By John Groh

My colleagues and I at RACVB were pleased with a recent report showing increased visitor spending in Winnebago County for last year, but I must say we weren't entirely surprised.

Considering the rising number of visitor attractions in the region, it doesn't take a crystal ball to predict positive trends. There are many reasons why our visitor appeal has grown so significantly in recent years. And, there is a lot of credit to spread around.

Here's a snapshot of the progress and growth our region's visitor economy is seeing:

- Visitor spending reached an all-time high of \$383.7 million in 2017 (up 8.3 percent from 2016).
- That spending put 3,084 people to work (up 6.9 percent) and generated payroll of \$93.8 million (up 9.6 percent).
- Dollars spent by visitors generated \$21.8 million in state taxes and \$7.78 million in local taxes (up 14.3 percent and 8.5 percent, respectively).

State leader in growth

Looking back at trends over almost a decade, there's even more to celebrate. To keep our perspective on target, RACVB consistently reviews how we stack up against 12 other Illinois counties of similar size and scope. We measure ourselves against McLean, DuPage, Champaign, Lake, Peoria, Will, Sangamon, St. Clair, Madison, Kane, Rock Island and Cook counties.

From 2009 to 2017, Winnebago County outpaced all of those major metropolitan counties in visitor spending growth. Over that time span, spending increased by 53 percent in Winnebago County, easily surpassing the set average of 35 percent.

So what does it mean? The numbers confirm for me the success of strategies we've followed in recent years that involve important local, state and national partners in various roles that complement one another. Our strategies play to the region's known strengths and assets, while also charting new territory to push the envelope on what's possible.

Let me offer some examples. The Illinois Office of Tourism helps us distribute content that will get into print, be heard on radio or appear on TV or device screens. We make it easy for potential visitors to learn where to have a great meal, a good cup of coffee, a unique museum experience or a relaxing stroll in a garden or along the river.

Beyond that, we've been highly successful working with a national public relations firm to place stories in print, broadcast and online platforms that tell our story in Illinois and beyond.

Getting creative

We don't just market what the region already has to offer. RACVB has a team devoted to destination development. Their job is to create new initiatives or events that improve the quality of life and sense of

place and pride among residents, while also attracting visitors. Stroll on State, Forest City Beautiful, and the rotating public sculpture project are initiatives of this team.

Of course, sports marketing is a big part of our job at RACVB, in partnership with many. The depth of our region's capabilities in the sports market are highlighted, in part, through our sports ambassadors project featuring such hometown sports luminaries as Fred VanVleet (Toronto Raptors), Angel Martinez (world-class amateur boxer) and Corey Anderson (mixed martial arts fighter).

Beyond our obvious marketing efforts, we support and encourage entrepreneurs whose creative ventures improve quality of life and attract visitors. Their energy is palpable right now.

So, after the euphoria settles from the recent visitor analysis, what's next? We'll dig deeper into the numbers to confirm what's working best and do more of that. Also, I can't wait to see what comes from the destination development team, which is working with a task force appointed by Mayor Tom McNamara earlier this summer to redevelop Davis Park in downtown Rockford.

Knowing that potential visitors are inspired by visuals, we're working hard to tell our story on platforms that feature images enticing enough to motivate people to come here and see the real thing.

For a few days, we'll savor the good news. Then, it's onward and upward with the numbers. The best is yet to come.

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

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