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2018 WAS A RECORD YEAR FOR GRAND RAPIDS AREA CONVENTION & TOURISM BUSINESS

Experience Grand Rapids celebrates ninth consecutive year of tourism growth

Grand Rapids, Mich. – Experience Grand Rapids (EXGR), the area’s official destination marketing organization, has announced that 2018 was another record-breaking year for Kent County hotels. From 2017 to 2018 hotel room revenue increased 2.1% (\$216 million) and was the highest ever recorded for Kent County. This record year is affected by a variety of factors including leisure travel, convention and sports group attendance, a healthy local business economy and the ongoing efforts of the Experience Grand Rapids sales and marketing teams.

"For the ninth consecutive year Kent County hotel room revenue has grown over the prior year," said Doug Small, President and CEO of Experience Grand Rapids. "Grand Rapids is now being recognized by the meetings, convention and youth sports markets as a destination that competes with cities twice its size. Thanks to the energized craft beer and food scenes, impressive arts and culture offerings, best-in-class facilities and a growing knowledge of the outdoor recreation options available in Kent County, the Grand Rapids brand is fast becoming known throughout the nation as not just a place for events, but for leisure visitors to experience."

Craft beverages like coffee, cider, cocktails and beer continue to be a reason that visitors come to Grand Rapids and Kent County. To help nurture craft beer tourism, EXGR launched the Beer City Brewsader Passport in October 2015. Since then it has documented beer enthusiasts as they explore the Grand Rapids’ beer scene. To date there are over 13,000 Brewsaders that have visited at least eight breweries and redeemed their stamps for the official Brewsader tee shirt. This means there have been over 110,000 brewery visits recorded in the Passport. Statistics also show that 41% of Brewsaders are from outside the state including over 250 international Brewsaders. In addition to its beer scene that is enticing visits from all over the globe, the food scene continues to evolve.

Recently named one of the ‘Top 10 Underrated Foodie Cities in the U.S.’ (*Web Restaurant Store, 2018*), the food scene is also drawing people to Grand Rapids. One way that EXGR has helped promote the restaurants is through Restaurant Week GR, which will be celebrating its 10th year in August. Since it started in 2019, EXGR has helped raise over \$155,000 for scholarships for students attending the Secchia Institute for Culinary Education at Grand Rapid Community College.

“Giving back to the community is important to us at Experience Grand Rapids,” said Small. “We want to support the amazing talent coming out of our local colleges and universities and these scholarships, provided by the money raised annually during Restaurant Week Grand Rapids, has allowed us to support our future industry stars.”

Diversifying the talent in the Kent County hospitality area has also been a major focus of Experience Grand Rapids. Angela Nelson, Vice President of Multicultural Business Development at Experience Grand Rapids, has worked to forge strategic partnership opportunities to help the organization become more visibly recognized as a community partner that extends beyond tourism since her hiring in March 2017.

An example of these efforts was the “Discover Tourism GR” event.

“‘Discover Tourism GR’ is an ongoing effort to help diversify the hospitality industry,” said Nelson. “The initiative was launched in partnership with Morehouse College, an all-male historically black college in Atlanta, Georgia. Eight Morehouse students applied and were selected for the opportunity to visit Grand Rapids and explore the hospitality job opportunities that Kent County had to offer. This annual event will continue and scale to attract more students across the HBCU (Historically Black College and University) network of colleges and universities across the U.S.; and is just one initiative that will help us do our part in reducing the gap in our overall workforce shortage as well as increasing the representation of minorities in management.”

Looking ahead, Kent County will add over 1,300 hotel rooms in the next couple years. Small sees this increase in hotel room inventory as an opportunity for Experience Grand Rapids and the West Michigan Sports Commission to work with stakeholders to bring even more visitors to the area.

"By working together with our stakeholders and partners like the West Michigan Sports Commission, we plan to take on this added hotel room supply in 2019," said Small. "Aside from our marketing efforts to promote the destination as a 'cool' place to visit, we have multiple sales efforts in the works. Our dedicated and dynamic sales team is working with local residents to help bring conventions and meetings to the area through our 'Bring It to GR' campaign. In addition to these efforts, our collaborative efforts with the West Michigan Sports Commission has also increased visitor traffic through amateur sports events. We invite anyone that is involved in a convention, meeting or youth sports to get in contact with us so that we can help Bring It to GR. We are also hosting two large tourism industry related tradeshow in 2019; Connect Faith and Going on Faith, and they will give us a chance show off Grand Rapids to thousands of meeting planners that we hope bring future groups to Grand Rapids and Kent County.

“These are just a few areas of concentration as we continue to build the brand nationally. The continued cooperation amongst our many partners throughout Kent County will allow for success for our stakeholders, but also help provide amenities that improve the quality of life for our residents.”

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About Experience Grand Rapids

Established in 1927, Experience Grand Rapids (EXGR), the areas' official destination marketing organization, strengthens the region's economic vitality and quality of life by marketing Grand Rapids/Kent County as a preferred visitor destination.