

The Voice Column for January 2019

Positive press for a city 'finding its voice'

By John Groh

Every year, evidence mounts that events like Stroll on State are more than just one-day windfalls for downtown and the city overall. Observers from beyond our city limits repeatedly cite Stroll as symbolic of the downtown resurgence and the positive vibe that's evident across our city.

Downtown merchants and vendors tell me they spend weeks ramping up for Stroll day to give excellent service on the spot and create a positive experience that encourages repeat business throughout the year. The lasting impact of Stroll also is a consistent theme from people who attend the event.

One Stroll attendee hit the nail on the head with this comment, *"(I like) ... seeing all of the people in our beautiful city come together to prove that we are on a comeback. The local stores, local food, etc. were fantastic ... proud to call this great city home!"*

Certainly, we know Rockford is a great city. Voices from other places now are echoing that fact and citing Stroll among the proof points that the comeback is real.

One Stroll visitor in November was Arnie Weissmann, editor in chief of Travel Weekly, which is known as the voice of the travel industry. His experience at Stroll persuaded him to revise his previous negative view of our city.

In a column last year, he'd described Rockford as "a perfect example of a Rust Belt city in decline," among other unflattering descriptions. Weissmann, who lives in New York City, accepted an invitation to see firsthand what's happening here. He visited on Stroll day. Here's an excerpt from a column that appeared after his visit.

"And so it was that I found myself in Rockford the weekend before last, watching its holiday parade, exploring its shops, talking with locals ... Although the route I had taken into town passed shuttered factories and quite a few for lease/for sale/space available signs, the town center was alive with interesting shops, restaurants, pubs and rooftop bars, many featuring drinks produced by one of the town's microbreweries, a whiskey distillery or a coffee roaster."

Near the end of his column, he wrote: "Rockford, I apologize."

He's not the only one taking a second look at the city. In November, The Chicago Tribune featured Rockford on the cover of the Travel Section. The main image of the two-page spread was a half-page picture of the huge crowd at Stroll on State in November 2017. The story was headlined, "Rockford Coming Back," and the secondary headline read, "Once-sleepy downtown has awakened, and pride among residents is palpable."

Two weeks after Stroll this year, the Tribune featured a column about Rockford by Kristen McQuery, a member of the paper's Editorial Board and a native of our city. The column focused on "Minding the Gap," a documentary that details the life struggles of three Rockford friends growing up in dysfunctional homes in a depressed city that offers limited prospects. McQuery understands the city's problems, but she is encouraged by changes that are underway. She wrote:

“It is a city with a bad reputation but not necessarily an earned one.” She mentioned population loss, crime and high taxes. I’m happy she didn’t stop there. She continued: “Rockford has its heroes, too. I’d like to think the city is finding its voice. There are investors dedicated to revitalizing downtown. Restaurants, markets and festivals are providing a new draw, and there’s a loyalty among people from Rockford you won’t find in other towns.”

At RACVB, we welcome anyone from beyond our region – including journalists and travel writers – to come see for themselves what’s happening here. We can weather the scrutiny. Stroll on State and events like it are Exhibit A of what happens when we put our best foot forward as a community. When we work together, we cannot help but change minds and hearts.

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.