

## Voice Column for September 2019

### Good news for Rockford in attracting tourism

*By John Groh*

William Wrigley Jr., a Chicago marketing genius of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, once was asked why he persisted in aggressively advertising his chewing gum when everyone in America surely already knew about his ubiquitous product.

“Advertising is pretty much like running a furnace,” he replied. “You’ve got to keep on shoveling coal. Once you stop stoking, the fire goes out.”

Like our colleagues in Chicago whose job it is to promote that great Illinois city, we at RACVB spend our days shoveling proverbial coal to fuel interest in local attractions, businesses and events and to help create new ones.

About this time of year, we get numbers that reflect how well we’re doing locally – and how the rest of the state is performing – to keep those economic fires aglow. The numbers reflect the huge economic impact of visitor spending statewide and locally. We have good news to report again this year. The local numbers echo the upward trend that has been consistent across the state for several years.

We look to the U.S. Travel Association and the Illinois Office of Tourism for our stats. First, the big picture for Illinois in 2018:

- Over the past decade, the number of domestic visitors increased by 26 million, bringing the total to 114.6 million in 2018. Of those visitors, 84 percent traveled here for leisure purposes. Illinois welcomed an additional 2.3 million international visitors last year.
- Visitor spending supported 342,300 jobs across the state, an increase of 6,200 over 2017.
- Visitor spending overall grew to \$41.7 billion in 2018, up \$2 billion from the previous year, generating \$3.3 billion in tax revenue (a 7 percent increase) for the state and local communities.

Winnebago County mirrors Illinois’ positive trajectory:

- Visitor spending here reached almost \$392 million, up more than 2 percent from 2017.
- More than 3,000 local folks go to work every day supported by visitor spending, with payroll increasing 1.3 percent to almost \$95 million.
- Tax receipts rose in accordance with the increased spending, bringing in more than \$23 million for the state and almost \$7 million for local coffers.

RACVB does its part to keep the furnace of economic impact glowing by creating and promoting new initiatives, while also marketing established events, businesses and activities.

Examples include Stroll on State, which continues to expand with new attractions each year; Forest City Beautiful initiatives, including this year's CRE8IV Mural Festival, which drew thousands of visitors to downtown Rockford and continues to enhance the central city; Davis Park revitalization efforts; and the popular Fred VanVleet events, including Jurassic Park RKFD, FanFest and Camp and Sport Stories, which is part of RACVB's Bring Your Game 2 Rockford campaign.

As additional examples of our work and role, we partnered with Visit Beloit to host the National Softball Association Girls Fast Pitch Tournament earlier this summer, which boasted 85 teams in competition and resulted in an estimated \$1.1 million economic impact to the region.

And we worked with the Jehovah's Witness organization to bring a regional convention to the BMO Harris Bank Center that resulted in 20,000 visitors filling hotel rooms and visiting local restaurants and attractions over four consecutive weekends this summer. The estimated economic impact of the convention is estimated at about \$800,000.

It's been a busy year, and there's more to come. The numbers look great, for sure, but none of us at RACVB is resting on our laurels – or leaning on our shovels, so to speak. Like Mr. Wrigley, we like fire in the furnace.

*John Groh is president/CEO of Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. The mission of 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.*