

May 2019 Column for The Voice

Many exciting projects on the horizon

Artists come in May to transform now-blank building walls

By John Groh

The numbers are in and all I can say is: WOW. Last year was another banner year for attendance at area events and visits to local facilities that serve residents and attract guests from afar.

So many factors are working together to ensure that this upward trend continues. For one, the region truly is benefiting from the Reclaiming First project, which greatly improved our sports complexes and allows the region to serve local residents' recreational needs and attract a growing number of important sporting tournaments. The most recent stats show that, once again, our sports complexes led the way in attendance by locals and visitors, which translates to improved health outcomes for locals and tremendous benefits for area businesses.

At the same time, existing recreational and cultural events and facilities pull in large numbers of visitors while new destinations and events are being developed every year to bring more variety to our menu of attractions.

Projects on the horizon will fuel the positive trajectory of attendance and economic impact. To name a few: the expected 2020 opening of the Hilton Embassy Suites Hotel and Rockford Conference Center in downtown; the indoor City Market downtown (projected to open in mid-May); and soon-to-be-announced improvements to Davis Park.

Overall, attendance at area events and sites in 2018 was 8.6 million, compared to 8.3 million in 2017. While that increase is a few hundred thousand, the real relevance is apparent in the bigger picture. Over five years, total attendance has risen by well over a million visitors for an increase of 13 percent.

Sports Success Formula

That's a lot of people and lot of new revenue being infused into the local economy. A recent event and one coming up in July exemplify the sports success formula.

In April, some 27,000 soccer players, coaches and spectators flocked to Mercyhealth Sportscore Two over two weekends for the Puma Champions Cup competition. Lindsay Arellano, vice president of sales and services at RACVB, estimated the economic impact of this year's Puma competition at \$1.8 million.

In addition, in a first-time partnership, the Rockford region is teaming up with Beloit to welcome the National Softball Association Girls Fast Pitch World Series, the largest tournament of its kind

ever to be hosted here. The event, set for July 17 to 21, is expected to generate more than \$2.1 million in economic impact and use some 4,000 room nights in Rockford and 1,600 more in Freeport, the Chicago suburbs and Beloit, Wis.

Metromorphosis Mural Festival

Beyond that, I am tremendously excited about what we're calling Metromorphosis Mural Festival, which will be an extremely colorful and exciting week in May. The new festival, produced by RACVB, will bring seven internationally and regionally known artists to downtown Rockford to create large-scale murals on now-blank building walls.

These new murals will add to a growing collection of professionally created, varied, interesting and interactive public artwork that already is adding interest and drawing residents and visitors to downtown. The RACVB Foundation's Forest City Beautiful initiatives previously have included widespread landscaping and beautification projects, the visiting sculpture program and new murals that were created last summer.

We're planning a week-long series of events coordinated with creation of the murals. The public will be able to watch the artists at work as they beautify large spaces on highly visible walls downtown.

The murals are intended to peak interest, unify neighbors and welcome guests. These large blank walls, which now are entirely unremarkable, will be transformed in interesting ways that showcase the unique character of our city. What a way to kick off the summer. I can't wait!