

February 2020 Voice Column

Rockford 2000: Then and now – Progress has made downtown Rockford a thriving destination

By John Groh

Picture it, Rockford 2000. Symbolic of the region's stalled economy, empty downtown storefronts evoked images of a thriving past but a bleak future. Fast forward two decades to today's vibrant city center, the heart of a region that is thriving from tourism-related initiatives and, overall, on the cusp of greatness.

At the bureau, we believe our efforts, in concert with many regional partners, have been a vital link between a bleak yesterday, a thriving present and a future with no limits. One strategic step after another brought us to where we are today.

"It's staggering to see the amount of progress we've made downtown in the last 10 years and it's been both public and private investment making that a reality," says Rockford Mayor Tom McNamara. "We're seeing growth in retail, residential and commercial development, as well with sports tourism, and that's helping downtown become a destination. Coupled with the RACVB developing Stroll on State into a regional attraction, there's no doubt that the sky's the limit for growth in downtown."

A glimpse at what was happening in the middle of the past two decades highlights the domino effect of progress. The advent of City Market and Friday Night Flix in the summer of 2010 was critical. Downtown became the place to be on Friday nights. By 2010, the dilapidated Amerock Building had been protected by its placement on the National Register of Historic Places. Plans soon emerged that led to the building's renovation and construction of Embassy Suites by Hilton Rockford Riverfront and Rockford Conference Center, set to open in April.

In 2013, when we launched Stroll on State, volunteers covered the many empty storefronts in holiday paper to disguise vacancies. By year three, virtually all of those buildings were occupied. In addition, when Stroll started, plans existed for the UW Health Sports Factory to be built along the east bank of the Rock River. That \$25 million project broke ground early in 2015 and the facility opened mid-2016. It is thriving!

At the same time, further investment in regional sports facilities through the Reclaiming First initiative spurred increased tournament bookings, which continue to escalate and diversify. Beyond tourism results that we can see with our eyes, allow me to showcase some of the less obvious but extremely important benefits to the region. Here are 2018 stats:

- Jobs: Tourism put more than 3,000 local residents to work with a \$95 million payroll
- Attractions: 8.6 million visitors and residents annually
- Tax revenue: \$6.8 million generated for local tax rolls
- Visitor spending: \$392 million annually

That spending is spread widely throughout the region at hotels, restaurants and retail businesses. We work closely with businesses such as Lucha Cantina, where owner Josh Binning sees a direct bottom-line impact from visiting sports teams.

“We make it clear to RACVB that we can take large parties, and there’s not a lot of places that will,” he said. “We’ve been intentional about it from the beginning, and it’s an essential part of our business.”

RACVB is the hub organization solely focused on tourism initiatives through regional partnerships, and we’re happy to be at the center of progress. We’re entering the new decade on a roll.

John Groh is president/CEO of Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau. RACVB is responsible for promoting the Rockford region as an attractive travel destination and enhancing its public image as a dynamic place to live and work. Through the impact of travel, RACVB strengthens the economic position of the region and provides opportunities for people in our communities. www.gorockford.com

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