

**Rockford, Illinois Regional Destination Master Plan
Request for Proposal**



Introduction:

The Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau (RACVB) has been awarded ARPA and State of Illinois Grant funding to complete a Regional Tourism Master Plan that will serve to revitalize the tourism economy in the region as well as provide a path forward to create a more resilient tourism economy for the future. The Tourism Master Plan envisioned will encompass the travel, tourism, and outdoor recreation strategy for the Rockford region.

Who we are:

RACVB is a private, non-profit organization established in 1984 to promote and champion efforts to make the Rockford Region an overnight visitor destination. www.gorockford.com

Our Mission:

The Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau drives quality of life and economic growth for our citizens through tourism marketing and destination development.

We measure our success based on measuring the following priority results. The outcome of this project must support these priorities:

- 1. **Create Economic Wealth:** The Rockford Region experiences growth in tourism’s leading indicators.
- 2. **Enhance Tourism Product:** The Rockford Region offers unique and marketable experiences and venues that meet or exceed visitor expectations and enhance quality of life for citizens.
- 3. **Engage Constituents on Behalf of Tourism:** RACVB tourism marketing and destination development efforts have broad support among key stakeholders.

Project Background and Context:

As the tourism industry and our community recovers from the pandemic, there is incredible opportunity to improve, refocus, and redefine the tourism master plan for the Rockford region. It has been many years since investment in tourism research has been funded and much has changed that must be considered to rebuild and grow the regions tourism economy.

The Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau (RACVB) last developed a comprehensive Destination Development Plan in 2000 that informed priorities for tourism infrastructure and marketing over the ensuing 20 years. Priority was given to the successful development of Sports Tourism in the region. The Report also noted opportunity for development of Outdoor/Recreation Leisure Tourism. This project would provide detailed insight to take this opportunity forward.

The Region 1 Planning Council (RPC) adopted a revised Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for Northern Illinois in November 2020 that specifically identified Tourism as one of six key goals to accomplish the overall RPC Vision and including tactics to support the tourism economy throughout the CED:

In 2025, the Northern Illinois Region will be a world-class, diverse, inclusive, and prosperous region with a resilient economic base and a superior quality of life that outperforms peer regions in job growth, capital investment, and innovation.

To reach that vision, the Steering Committee, building off the previous CEDS, approved the following goals and tactics:

- 1. A full range of infrastructure, with emphasis on transportation, utilities, and communication in order to successfully meet the needs of the region's businesses.**
 - Increase mobility options for each county's suite of transit services, including innovative mobility services to link residents and workforce to wider labor, employment, and recreational markets and a passenger rail intercity connection.
 - Leverage the region's interstates and arterials as an economic catalyst, while improving overall highway access for businesses and residents
- 2. Sustainable economic development which improves quality of life while protecting the environment and natural resources that lend resiliency to the region**
- 3. Collaborative regional economic development efforts, emphasizing communication, coordination, shared assets, and promotion of the region for business investment**
 - Establish a regional identity and leverage our location and shared assets to create a marketing strategy for the region
- 4. Efficient business development, expansion, diversification, job growth, and innovation throughout the region.**
 - Strengthen existing industry clusters and develop selected emerging clusters within the region.
 - Identify, create, and promote programs, activities, and policies which foster innovation, inclusivity, and nurture entrepreneurial activity, particularly in emerging and existing businesses.

5. A high quality of life enhanced by the region's sense of place, livability, community health, and creative environments.

- Strengthen downtowns and surrounding neighborhoods, both urban and rural, as anchors for work, live, and play, while creating active and diverse neighborhoods that help the region attract and retain young workers

6. Promotion of the natural environment, cultural and recreational amenities, and our industrial and agricultural legacy to support a visitor-based economy.

- Develop and promote tourism and recreational use of the region's natural assets, including waterways, parks, preserves, and agricultural areas.
- Expand regional trail connections and accompanying development, capitalizing on increased amenity value, particularly in rural areas.
- Develop a regional marketing vision for the region, encompassing all potential opportunities for visitor-based economies.

This work effort will support the adopted goals of the CEDS as well as provide direction and insight to the RACVB as the designated tourism management/marketing organization for the Rockford region. We anticipate this plan to provide the path that will ensure long-term viability of the tourism economy within Rockford and the surrounding county and engage our stakeholders and community members in the process.

Tourism Industry Economic Impact:

Tourism is a major industry in the greater Rockford region. In 2019, prior to the pandemic, tourism in Winnebago County generated \$483.2 million in direct spending (\$851.1 million in total spending) and supported over 6,300 jobs. The pandemic greatly impacted consumer sentiment and willingness to travel, and the impact has been felt throughout the region. Tourism direct spending in Winnebago County declined by over 25% percent in 2020 compared to 2019 with a loss of over 500 jobs. In 2021 tourism direct spending increased to \$436.4 million and supported 6,144 direct and indirect jobs.

Boone County saw a 4% increase in tourism spending in 2020 compared to 2019 Direct spending increased from \$22.3 million to \$23.3 million with total spending increasing from \$40.3 million to \$47.0 million. This demonstrates the shift in tourism activity to outdoors and the opportunity to further pursue and leverage outdoor tourism for the region. Impact in 2021 remained flat over 2020, with \$23.2 million in direct and \$43 million in total spending.

Destinations and Destination Marketing Organizations often dedicate their resources to three key segments of tourism: Leisure tourism, Convention and Meetings, and Sports.

The existing Tourism Development Plan identified sports marketing as a potential tourism opportunity for the region. Rockford has invested in sports infrastructure over the last ten years that has provided impetus for expanded sports tourism through attraction and retention of amateur sports competitions. This cornerstone of the regional tourism market is slowly coming back as competition resumes, but alone cannot sustain and grow tourism.

The region has a wealth of outdoor parks, forest preserves and green spaces that may be leveraged to attract leisure visitation. Winnebago County possesses almost 20,000 acres of green space and is home to four rivers (Rock, Sugar, Kishwaukee, Pecatonica) that contribute to outdoor recreation opportunities. These assets are not well known outside the region, and not well connected to each other but present a potential for growing the reputation of the region as an outdoor recreation hub and tourism destination. Emphasis on identifying gaps and opportunities to connect these outdoor resources is an expected outcome of this plan.

The greater Rockford area currently lacks meeting and convention space to be competitive in this segment of the tourism economy. This leaves the area highly dependent on sports and leisure tourism and presents an opportunity to address as a strategy for creating a more resilient tourism economy.

In addition, consumer travel sentiment has shifted because of the pandemic with consumers considering options for travel that is within a reasonable drive time more desirable than destinations that require air travel. This opens consideration for both expanded leisure visitation and opportunities to develop the market for business meetings and conferences.

The Tourism Master Plan is intended to gather information and input to consider how best to optimize mix of tourism business to build a more resilient tourism industry going forward.

Geographic Region:

The Destination Plan will focus on areas within Winnebago & Boone counties that have tourism entities to support implementation of outcomes of the work. This includes the City of Rockford, Winnebago, and Boone Counties in partnership with RACVB and other tourism entities. Assessment of the outdoor recreation assets within Winnebago & Boone counties is a deliverable of the work effort. The plan should consider the impacts and possibilities for tourism to be a positive contributor at the neighborhood, area, city, and county levels.

Work Product:

The Destination Plan is expected to bring together various research and data insights into a comprehensive overview of the tourism opportunities today and into the future. The elements of the project may be phased over a 12-to-18-month time horizon to ensure that initial research and data collections can be shared and inform community engagement and plan prioritization. All work and deliverables must be completed by June 30, 2024.

We anticipate engagement that looks deeply and critically at the Destination Product, current visitor demographics, stakeholder sentiment about destination and destination organization performance and economic impact of tourism.

The engagement must articulate what is needed for the future by identifying gaps in product, understanding potential future visitor audience, with the intention of creating an equitable and accessible tourism culture and identifying opportunities to grow a resilient tourism economy.

The following outlines the anticipated elements of the work product:

Product Analysis/Asset Assessment (Regional, Local, Neighborhoods):

1. Outdoor recreation assets and amenities (inventory, descriptions, amenities, accessibility, quality, gaps, opportunities)
2. Competitive assessment of hotel and meeting spaces (quantity, location, quality, capacities) compared to selected competitive markets
3. Competitive assessment of sports assets (quantity, location, quality, capacities, gaps/opportunities) compared to selected competitive markets
4. Assessment of current wayfinding (existing, gaps and opportunities)
5. Event assessment (existing, target audience, assessment of visitor opportunity)
6. Transportation infrastructure (access to regional assets, gaps, and opportunities)

Visitor profile/demographics:

1. Current visitor analytics and sentiment (demographics, psychographics)
2. Barriers to visitation (cultural, accessibility, equity)
3. Targeted future visitor profile

Tourism Economy:

1. In-depth analysis on the current value of tourism industry to the local, county, and regional economies
2. Analysis of industry workforce and needs/opportunities to support a robust workforce

Destination Performance:

1. Conduct a stakeholder/community analysis of the destination product, tourism readiness and needs
2. Conduct a stakeholder/community analysis of tourism entities (RACVB and others)

Future Needs Assessment:

1. Identify funding opportunities/alternatives to support implementation of the Destination Plan
2. Identify infrastructure and technology needs to support implementation of the Destination Plan

We anticipate that this work will be executed in phases that may be defined as Input (data collection and assessment), Analysis (identification of opportunities and gaps) and a Final Report summarizing the recommendations, funding options and implementation priorities.

Project Submittal Schedule:

The RACVB anticipates the following schedule for the RFP process and vendor selection:

January 6, 2023	RFP Released
January 13, 2023	Non-mandatory pre-submittal meeting via Zoom
January 18, 2023	RFP Questions submitted to RACVB
January 25, 2023	RACVB Response provided
February 3, 2023	RFP Submissions Due
February 6-17, 2023	RACVB Evaluation & Interviews with proposers
February 24, 2023	Vendors Notified by RACVB
March 1, 2023	Target for Project work to kick off

RFP Instructions:

General:

It is the responsibility of each proposer, before making a submission, to review the details of the RFP thoroughly. Clarifications about the RFP must be made in writing (electronic submission accepted) by the date noted above.

Please direct questions to: Kristen Paul kpaul@gorockford.com

Pre-Submittal information meeting:

A non-mandatory pre-submittal meeting will be available to any interested proposers on January 13, 2023 at 9 a.m. Central Standard Time (CST). Please contact Kristen Paul should you wish to participate in the scheduled meeting (via Zoom).

RFP Submittal Schedule:

RFP responses are due on February 3, 2023, by 5:00 pm CST and emailed to:

Kristen Paul

Vice President Destination Development
kpaul@gorockford.com

All email submissions must be clearly labeled and titled: Destination Master Plan Proposal. Please note that the RACVB is only accepting digital (pdf) submittals – no paper – for all proposals. We will confirm response of all submittals within 24 hours of receipt, although it is the proposer’s responsibility to ensure your submittal is successful.

Project Teaming:

Developing a comprehensive destination master plan and completing all phases of work in the outlined scope of work may require proposers to develop a multidisciplinary, multi-agency team of contractors or consultants. This approach is welcomed, albeit not required. However, each proposal must be submitted by a lead entity with a clear outline of roles and responsibilities assigned to each entity included in the submitting.

Commitment to Diversity & Inclusion: Favorable consideration will be given to proposals that include diversity in the ownership of firms responding to the RFP, and of the individuals who will be key project members completing the work.

Preliminary Evaluation:

Received proposals will be reviewed for completeness in addressing the work plan outlined within this RFP. The RACVB reserves the right to contact any or all the proposers to request additional information for purposes of clarification of responses.

Consideration of Proposals:

The RACVB and representatives of the Master Plan Steering Committee designated by the RACVB will consider the submittals, interviews, qualifications, and prior experience. At any phase in this process the RACVB reserves the right to terminate, suspend or modify this selection process, reject any or all submittals as deemed in the best interest of the RACVB and stakeholders.

Basis for Evaluation and Selection:

The RACVB intends to select organizations or teams based on scoring and evaluation performed by the RACVB and members of the Master Plan Steering Committee. Selection considerations include (1) RFP proposals that are most responsive to the work product outlined in the RFP, (2) proposals that contain the combination of experience and qualifications offering the best overall value to the RACVB and (3) interviews that best demonstrate overall project understanding and experience with similar projects. Equal weight will be given to each of these considerations.

The submissions must provide evidence that all team members have sufficient understanding and experience with similar projects.

Proposer Qualifications:

The RACVB may make such inquiries as it deems necessary to determine the ability of the proposer to perform the work and to meet deadlines of the project. RFP proposals shall include a description of the proposed team in both narrative and chart form. The proposal should clearly indicate the relationship, roles and responsibilities of each organization and team member. Key positions should be identified by name and title, with narrative describing their respective areas of expertise, responsibility, and reporting.

Proposal Content:

In addition to the qualifications noted above, proposers must provide examples of master planning projects with a similar scope of work. They must provide a clear understanding to the proposed work and deliverables.

Proposers must supply a minimum of three (3) similar projects completed successfully including project name, client, client contact information, location, and special features of the project including description of services provided, dates of service and budget. RACVB reserves the right to contact these clients for references as part of the review and evaluation process.

Submissions must include an estimated timeline and budget for the project. Budget and timeline should align with the work product/deliverables outlined in this RFP.

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