



Photo Credit: Kevin Haas, Rock River Current

# FY26, Q3

## January - March, 2026

**GO ROCKFORD**  
Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau

The mission of GoRockford is to drive quality of life and economic growth for our citizens through tourism marketing and destination development.

[gorockford.com](http://gorockford.com)



# GoRockford Mission Statement

GoRockford drives quality of life and economic growth for our citizens through tourism marketing and destination development.

## PRIORITY RESULTS

### CREATE ECONOMIC WEALTH

The Rockford region experiences growth in tourism's leading indicators.

### 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.

### ENGAGE CONSTITUENTS ON BEHALF OF TOURISM

GoRockford tourism marketing and destination development efforts have broad support among key stakeholders.

## A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT/CEO



As we close the third quarter of FY26, Rockford's momentum is being reflected in both national visibility and measurable economic impact across our work.

This quarter, Rockford earned significant national media attention, generating more than **1 billion impressions** and **\$9.8 million in earned media value** through placements in *The Atlantic*, *The Economist*, and *Morning Brew's The Playbook*. These stories reinforce

Rockford's position as one of the Midwest's most affordable and attractive markets, elevating our profile among both visitors and potential residents.

Rockford Restaurant Week delivered record-breaking results, with **82 participating restaurants**, more than **3.5 million social media views**, and strong increases in sales, with many businesses reporting gains exceeding a **25%**. This program continues to be a key driver of economic activity for our local hospitality industry.

Our sales team delivered strong results this quarter, generating **4,790 future hotel room nights** and **\$2.9 million in economic impact**, while hosting major events such as the **AHL All-Star Classic** and **Rockin' Rockford** volleyball tournament. In addition, securing the **IHSA Boys Soccer State Finals** through **2028** positions Rockford for continued long-term growth in sports tourism.

Destination development efforts including a new multi-year partnership supporting Stroll on State, new sculptures, and a new festival coming up that will be announced in May.

Through Made for Rockford, our team expanded national outreach by attending the **TravMedia Summit**, conducting more than **50 one-on-one meetings** with journalists to pitch Rockford's story and build future media opportunities.

Together, these efforts reflect a focused strategy to grow visitation, strengthen our economy, and elevate Rockford's visibility on a national stage.

Be well,

John Groh  
GoRockford President/CEO

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# GoROCKFORD NEWS

## ROCKFORD RESTAURANT WEEK BREAKS RECORDS AND DRIVES ECONOMIC IMPACT



Franchesco's Ristorante accepts the Legacy Award to celebrate their community impact and 40th Anniversary at the post Rockford Restaurant Week news conference and awards ceremony in March 2026.

**Rockford Restaurant Week** continues to prove itself as one of GoRockford's most impactful economic and marketing initiatives, delivering measurable growth for the

region's hospitality industry. In 2026, a record **82 restaurants participated** (up significantly from 65 in 2025). The event not only drives awareness of the region's culinary scene but also directly supports local businesses, with many participating restaurants reporting their most successful Rockford Restaurant Week to date and sales increases exceeding **25%**, with some seeing gains of **50% or more** over previous years they participated.

The 2026 marketing campaign generated over **3.5 million social media views** (more than triple the previous year) and **87,724 website views** to the landing page. Advertising efforts included billboards and digital advertising targeted to Chicago suburbs, and Milwaukee area, which generated **1.5 million impressions**, while local and regional media coverage reached **473 mentions**.

Nearly **2,000 votes** were cast per category for the **"Best Of" awards** (see winners on sidebar).

Winners were honored at a news conference in March at **Franchesco's Ristorante**. More than **45,000 referrals** from GoRockford website went directly to restaurant partners.

Overall, Rockford Restaurant Week is more than a promotional event: It is a strategic economic driver that supports small businesses, amplifies regional visibility, and positions Rockford as an emerging culinary destination. With continued year-over-year growth in participation, engagement, and measurable business impact, the program is poised to reach new heights every year.

## ROCKFORD EARNS NATIONAL MEDIA SPOTLIGHT

Rockford earned strong national media attention this quarter, with coverage in prominent outlets that positioned the region as a standout Midwest success story. **The Economist's** *"The Midwest's Remarkable Turnaround"* highlighted cities like Rockford as examples of economic revitalization and renewed relevance. **The Atlantic's** *"How the Midwest Became the Place to Move"* reinforced Rockford's appeal for those seeking value, space, and quality of life, while **Morning Brew's The Playbook** *"Meet the Midwest Most Affordable Market"* named Rockford the Midwest's most affordable market, emphasizing its accessibility for new residents and investors. Together, these placements provide strong third party validation and elevate Rockford into a national conversation about where people are choosing to relocate. This surge in media coverage aligns with strong housing market performance, as Rockford has ranked among the Top 10 nationally in **Realtor.com's Hottest Housing Markets** report for seven of the past 12 months. This consistent recognition signals sustained demand and growing visibility among prospective residents, driven by the region's affordability, lower cost of living, and quality of life. The combination of earned media and housing momentum strengthens GoRockford's positioning efforts and creates a compelling narrative that supports talent attraction, economic development, and long term destination growth.

## FINAL ROUND OF RESTAURANT GRANT

GoRockford announced a final round of the Restaurant Relief Grant bringing an additional **\$427,631** in state funding awarded to area restaurants in the fifth and final round of its **Restaurant Relief Grant Program**, helping businesses continue to recover from elevated unemployment insurance taxes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

## STATELY AWARD

GoRockford was honored to receive the **2026 Stately Hospitality and Tourism**

**Award** in March at the inaugural Stateline Honors Stately Gala hosted by the Stateline Chamber of Commerce. This recognition reflects the ongoing work of the team to promote Rockford and highlight what makes the region a great place to visit and live.



GoRockford receives the 2026 Stately Hospitality and Tourism Award from the Stateline Chamber of Commerce on March 3, 2026.

# SALES EFFORTS & RESULTS

## SPORTS AND MEETING SALES HIGHLIGHTS



Rockford IceHogs forward Nick Lardis shows his skills during the AHL All-Star Skills Competition in February 2026.

### ROCKFORD HOSTS FIRST-EVER AHL ALL-STAR CLASSIC IN ILLINOIS

The quarter kicked off with **BMO Center** hosting the **2026 AHL All-Star Classic** on **February 10-11**, a premier two-day hockey showcase featuring top American Hockey League (AHL) players competing in skills competitions and an exciting 3-on-3 tournament. The event drew players and fans from across the United States and Canada, filling local hotels and restaurants and generating an estimated **\$772,000** in economic impact for the region. GoRockford enhanced the visitor experience by staffing welcome tables at host hotels and providing resources and way finding assistance throughout the weekend.

### IHSA GIRLS STATE BOWLING FINALS RETURNS

The **2026 IHSA (Illinois High School Association) Girls State Bowling Finals** once again demonstrated Rockford's strength as a

premier host for long-standing championship events. With a history of over 30 years in the market, the event continues to bring athletes, families, and fans from across Illinois, generating an estimated **\$172,216** in economic impact.

### ROCKIN' ROCKFORD SERVES

On **March 7-8**, Rockford welcomed **Rockin' Rockford**, the largest AAU youth volleyball tournament in the region. This marquee event brought hundreds of teams and more than **10,000 athletes and families** and **341 teams** to the area for a weekend of high-level club competition. The tournament generated over **3,000 hotel room nights** and a full weekend of activity at **Sports Factory** and **Mercyhealth Sportscore Two**. The large scale tournament brought an estimated economic impact of **\$911,347**.

### ROCK RIVER BLAZE DEBUTS

**Rock River Blaze** hosted its inaugural home school basketball tournament at **Sports Factory**, **March 13-14**, attracting teams from across the Midwest. GoRockford helped elevate the event atmosphere by providing a s'mores station, which was a standout hit among participants. The tournament resulted in 1,200 room nights and an estimated economic impact of **\$1.3 million**.

### BIG WIN THIS QUARTER

Rockford secured a major sports tourism win this quarter with the selection to host the **IHSA Boys Soccer State Finals** from **2026-2028**. This prestigious, multi-year championship will bring the state's top teams and their fans to Rockford each November, generating nearly **\$493,128** in total economic impact over three years.

## BOOKING HIGHLIGHTS

#### ISHA Boys State Soccer Finals

November 2026, 2027 & 2028  
1,150 Total Room nights  
Estimated Economic Impact \$493,128

#### Phantom Regiment Show of Shows

July 3, 2026  
2,000 Room nights  
Estimated Economic Impact \$396,066

#### USACFC National Championships

May 2, 2026  
600 room nights  
Estimated Economic Impact \$333,42

#### Collegiate Club Bowling National Championship 2026

March 27, 2026  
400 room nights  
Estimated Economic Impact \$216,807

#### PWBA National Tour

April 29, 2026  
240 Room nights  
Estimated Economic Impact \$175,116

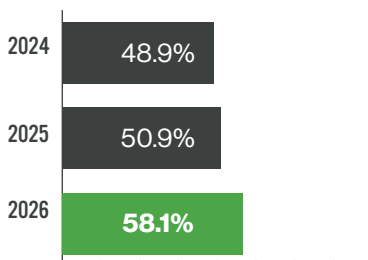
**Future Hotel Room Nights Booked During the Quarter: 4,790 with an economic impact of \$2.9 Million**  
**Number of Bookings: 16**



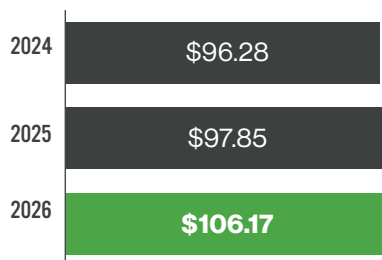
AHL Team Mascots pose during the AHL All-Star Classic in February 2026.

## WINNEBAGO COUNTY HOTEL STATISTICS January - March, 2026

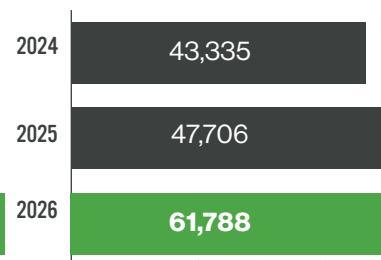
#### Year to Date Hotel Occupancy



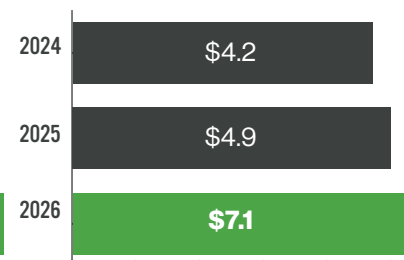
#### Year to Date Average Room Rate



#### Year to Date Room Demand (rooms sold)



#### Year to Date Revenue (in millions)



# MARKETING

## MEDIA MENTIONS & PLACEMENTS

GoRockford garners media mentions and placements to draw visitors to the Rockford region. Collaborating with regional and national media outlets, our team diligently seeks and shares captivating stories and compelling content centered experiences in Rockford, visiting the region and destination development.

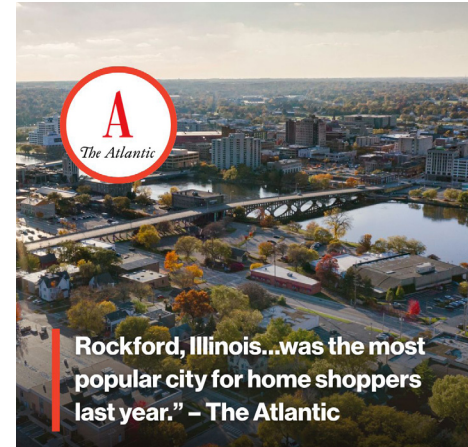
### NATIONAL MEDIA MENTIONS

**The Atlantic:** *"How the Midwest Became the Place to Move"* (03/23/2026) 11,310,000 impressions and \$418,470 Earned Media

**The Economist** *"The Midwest's remarkable turnaround"* (02/21/2026) 8,240,000 Impressions and \$304,880 Earned Media

**Realtor.com:** *"These Metros Are Giving Out-of-State Movers a Leg Up Onto the Property Ladder—and Bucking the Affordability Crisis"* (01/29/2026) 38,300,000 Impressions and \$1,417,000 Earned Media

**Morning Brew - The Playbook:** *"Meet the Midwest's hottest affordable market"* (03/25/2026) 350,000 impressions and \$12,950 Earned Media



The Atlantic features Rockford as a place to move for its affordable housing and proximity to major markets.

## SOCIAL MEDIA



### FACEBOOK

5.2 Million Views  
62,657 Followers



### INSTAGRAM

1 Million Views  
26,479 Followers



### LINKEDIN

3,053 Followers



### TikTok

457,000 Views  
13,907 Followers

### Top Facebook Post

February 4, 2026 | Impressions 305,517



Go Rockford is with Rockford Park Distr...

Published by Instagram · February 4 ·  
Come and Get Your Love (Single Version) ·  
Redbone

One week away!

The Illinois Snow Sculpting Competition returns Feb. 11  
- 14! Teams compete for the Illinois State Champion  
title in state and high school divisions. ... See more



2.4K 118 625



## EARNED MEDIA (January - March, 2026)

GoRockford works to attract visitors by directly pitching stories to media. Pitches are focused on economic development, tourism marketing and travel public relations.



**\$9,830,000**  
Ad equivalency



**1,057,000,000**  
Total impressions



**1,680**  
Number of mentions

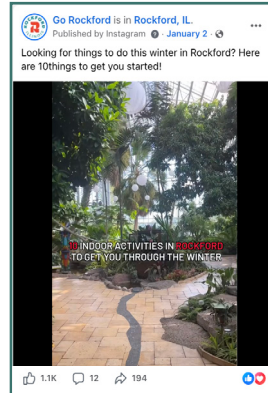
# MARKETING

## SOCIAL MEDIA PROMOTIONS

Each month of the quarter had a different focus, leading to impressive engagement.

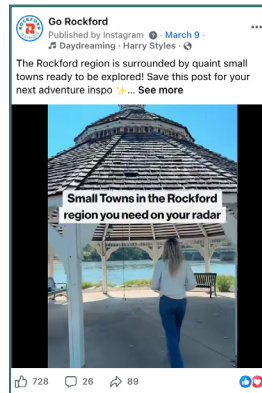
### JANUARY

January's promotions supported leading up to Rockford Restaurant Week and winter fun in Rockford, including cozy drink and attraction itineraries and where to enjoy snowy weather activities. January had an astounding **2.8 Million** views with **25K** in interactions for the month. This is an increase of **225%** from January 2025 at **859K views**.



### FEBRUARY

February had several promotional focuses as most of Rockford Restaurant Week was in February this year. GoRockford also celebrated Black History Month by profiling local murals by black artists and local businesses. This month also celebrated local shopping with guides for Valentine's Day. February's efforts had **1.2 million views** with **25K interactions**. This year is up significantly from 2025, which had **369K views**.



### MARCH

Spring Break travel and family itineraries was a large focus of March's efforts. Promotions also began for spring travel including where to see spring blooms. One of the more popular posts was about small towns in Winnebago County to visit. March's social media views were around **1.3 million** with **25K interactions**, up 46% from 2025.

## ROCKFORD RESTAURANT WEEK MARKETING CAMPAIGN

### Digital Ads and Billboards

GoRockford's three-month campaign with NextStar Media ended with Rockford Restaurant Week promotion. The media mix included out of home billboards in Milwaukee and Chicago suburbs, and Meta advertising. To date, the campaign has generated the following impressions: **1.2 million social media** and **254,095 out-of-home impressions**. There was also added-value coverage that included local media segments and advertising on news websites. Added value media generated an additional 1.2 million impressions.

### Influencers

To promote Rockford Restaurant Week, GoRockford reached out to local and regional influencers to promote the local dining scene in Rockford. Five were selected and they posted about their experience. For an expanded winter and Rockford Restaurant Week itinerary, we worked with **Mapping Our Tracks** (43K followers) and they visited Nicholas Conservatory, Alpine Hills Adventure Park for tubing, DC Estate Winery and stayed at Embassy Suites. We also worked with **Illinois Foodies** (251K followers) on two posts to promote the event. Overall the posts from influencers had a total of over **81,000 views**.

### Media Coverage

Local coverage on television, radio and in print was up to 473 media mentions in 2026 (up from 224 in 2025). GoRockford secured in studio segments for 2025 Rockford Restaurant Week winners.

#### MOST SEARCHED TERMS

Rockford Restaurant Week  
Events in Rockford  
Restaurants in Rockford, IL

#### MOST SEARCHED EVENTS

Restaurant Week  
45th Annual Rockford Home Show  
Illinois Snow Sculpting Competition

#### MOST SEARCHED LISTINGS

Anderson Japanese Gardens  
Oak and Embers Bistro  
Hidden Creek Estates

## Website Traffic Sources



144,972 total website visitors

# DESTINATION DEVELOPMENT

## GOROCKFORD SUPPORTS AMERICA 250 CELEBRATIONS



Revolutionary War reenactors attend the America 250 news conference at Midway Village Museum

GoRockford played a key role in supporting the **City of Rockford** and **Winnebago County** in planning and promoting the **America 250** kickoff press conference in February, helping to position the region as an active participant in this once in a lifetime national milestone.

The announcement introduced a coordinated, community wide approach to celebrating the **250th anniversary of the United States**, with GoRockford leading efforts to amplify the initiative through a dedicated campaign and regional storytelling platform.

A new America 250 landing page, **RockfordRegion250.com** was launched

to showcase events, share Rockford's history, and invite organizations to participate.

Program announcements highlighted a full year of experiences designed to honor the nation's past while engaging residents and visitors. Plans include community wide service initiatives, educational programming, arts and cultural events, and signature celebrations such as a citywide cleanup, youth concerts, immersive historical experiences, and Fourth of July festivities. Additional initiatives such as an art and essay competition for students and funding opportunities for local organizations will further expand participation. Together, these efforts position America 250 as both a commemorative moment and a strategic opportunity to tell Rockford's story, strengthen community pride, and drive visitation throughout 2026.

## GOROCKFORD ANNOUNCES UMB PARTNERSHIP

GoRockford strengthened its partnership with **UMB Bank** through a new three-year presenting sponsorship of Stroll on State, ensuring the continued success and growth of one of Rockford's largest and most beloved community events. This commitment secures the future of the festival through **2026, 2027, and 2028** and reflects a shared investment in community connection, economic impact, and creating meaningful downtown experiences.

As a signature event funded entirely through sponsors, partners, and volunteers, Stroll on State continues to serve as a major driver of visitation and local engagement. The partnership with UMB Bank provides stability and opportunity for growth, allowing GoRockford to enhance the event experience while maintaining its strong community foundation.

Even in challenging winter conditions, the 2025 event demonstrated its resilience and value, drawing an estimated 15,000 attendees downtown. The continued support from UMB Bank reinforces the long term sustainability of Stroll on State and its role in bringing the community together while supporting local businesses and nonprofit organizations.



The GoRockford team poses with UMB bank to celebrate the new three-year presenting sponsorship.

## 2026 A LOOK AHEAD

Looking ahead to 2026, GoRockford will continue to prioritize destination development initiatives that enhance the overall visitor experience while strengthening community pride. These efforts are designed to create a more vibrant, welcoming, and memorable environment across the region.

### FOREST CITY BEAUTIFUL

Forest City Beautiful will have newly installed signage with updated GoRockford branding. Spring and summer planting will kick off in May with over 130 downtown planters filled with beautiful flowers.

### CRE8IV SCULPTURES

New sculptures will be introduced in 2026 as part of CRE8IV's biannual sculpture program. The program has brought over 30 art pieces to neighborhoods and streets throughout Rockford. These installations not only enhance public areas, but also provide photo-worthy spots for residents and visitors to enjoy.

### NEW FESTIVAL

GoRockford is preparing to announce a new event in August to enhance the summer experience in Rockford and add to the offerings for America 250 Rockford to bring new visitors to Rockford for this dynamic festival.

### STROLL ON STATE 2026

Planning is already underway for Stroll on State 2026 to expand the festival into Davis Park (currently undergoing a major renovations). The expanded footprint will create an even bigger event for year 14.

Overall, these destination development initiatives reflect a forward thinking strategy that prioritizes placemaking, community engagement, and long term growth. By investing in beautification, public art, and signature events, GoRockford is positioning the region to remain competitive, attract new visitors, and continue building a strong sense of place for years to come.

# MADE FOR ROCKFORD

## GO ROCKFORD ATTENDS TRAVMEDIA SUMMIT



NBC Nightly News films the "Letters to Santa" segment with Mrs. Claus.

GoRockford represented the Rockford region at the **TravMedia Summit**, held in conjunction with **IMM North America**, a leading forum that connects travel and tourism public relations professionals with editors and writers to exchange ideas, discuss industry trends, and build media relationships. This event provided a valuable platform to elevate Rockford's visibility among top tier media and position the region within broader travel conversations.

GoRockford President/CEO John Groh and Whitney Martin, Program Director of Made For Rockford, conducted more than 50 one on one meetings with journalists from leading outlets, sharing story ideas and highlighting the region's momentum. Conversations focused on the stories behind Rockford's experiences, the people who bring them to life, and the unique reasons travelers should consider the destination, helping to build meaningful connections and generate future media opportunities.

## ROCKFORD PROMISE GRADUATES



Members of the GoTeam meet with Rockford Promise graduates and speak on the benefits of living and working in Rockford.

Members of the Made for Rockford Go-Team met with Rockford Promise graduates, highlighting the benefits of living and working in the Rockford area. These conversations provided scholars with direct connections to local ambassadors and resources to support their transition into the community. The effort also helped strengthen retention by reinforcing a sense of belonging and opportunity in Rockford.

Made for Rockford provided dozens of community tours for job applicants, offering a firsthand look at the area as a place to live and work. These tours supported recruitment efforts by helping candidates better understand the community and envision themselves building a life in Rockford.

## MADE FOR ROCKFORD TOURS

Made for Rockford provided dozens of community tours for job applicants, offering a first-hand look at the area as a place to live and work. These tours support recruitment efforts by helping candidates better understand the community and envision themselves building a life in Rockford.



Journalists and travel writers meet with prospective destinations at the TravMedia Summit in January 2026.



A giveaway item features a QR code to go to GoRockford's media coverage page for journalists to learn more about Rockford's key media highlights.

# GoROCKFORD BOARD & STAFF

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Executive Vice President



**Lindsay Arellano**  
Vice President of Sales &  
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**Joanne Nold**  
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**Amanda August**  
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Communications Specialist



**Chenaire Barmore**  
Communications Manager



**Miranda Brook**  
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Coordinator



**Kara Davis**  
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**Julie Huber**  
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Made for Rockford  
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Manager



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