

Stateline Area communities ready for the tourism season to start bringing visitors

By Clint Wolf For SBJ | Posted: Monday, April 1, 2013 2:00 pm

April is here, spring is in the air and families are waiting for school to end so they can get out and have a little fun and recreation.

Those thoughts also have communities such as Beloit, Janesville and Rockford giddy in anticipation of the start of the tourism season, as visitors' dollars have increasingly been an important part of local economies. And the money from tourism is growing in both Illinois and Wisconsin.

Illinois reported about 93.3 million visitors in 2011 up from about 86 million visitors in 2010. Of the 93.3 million visitors, 74.93 million were leisure travelers and 18.41 million were business travelers, according to the Illinois Department of Tourism.

The economic impact of tourism in 2011 generated 291,990 jobs, up from 287,500 jobs generated in Illinois in 2010. Illinois hotel/motel tax collections increased 8.3 percent from 2010 to 2011. Travel generated revenue grew by 15 percent in 2011 to more than \$2.3 billion, generating \$300 million more in revenue for state and local governments.

In Wisconsin, 181,369 jobs were directly related to visitor spending in 2011, up from 180,608 jobs in 2010, according to the Wisconsin Department of

Tourism.

Rock County saw \$174.9 million in visitor spending in 2011, up 9.73 percent from \$159.4 million in 2010. There were 3,515 jobs directly related to visitor spending in Rock County in 2011, up from 3,428 jobs in 2010, according to the Wisconsin Department of Tourism.

Walworth County saw \$409.7 million in visitor spending in 2011, up 13.75 percent from \$360.1 million in 2010. There were 6,268 jobs directly related to visitor spending in Walworth County in 2011, up from 5,902 jobs in 2010.

Bridget French, marketing manager for the Rockford Convention and Visitors Bureau, said tourism is a key part of the Rockford region's economy. There are 3,000 jobs directly tied to tourism in the Rockford region and about 15,000 jobs indirectly tied to tourism, she said. Tourism adds about \$300 million a year to the local economy.

"It's important for people to know that Rockford is a tourism destination," she said.

Rockford has experienced some success stories in the past year with some winning tourist attractions.

Rick's Picks: A Lifelong Affair with Guitars and Music, an exhibit that runs through April at the Burpee Museum of Natural History, was honored with state tourism awards in February. The exhibit was named Best New Event in Illinois. The exhibit features guitars, amplifiers, clothing and personal memorabilia of Rick Nielsen, guitarist with the rock band Cheap Trick.

The Rick's Picks exhibit is expected to go on tour across the country when it comes to an end in April, and a new exhibit will move into the Burpee Museum in May. Treasures, an exhibit done in cooperation with the Discovery Center Museum, will feature treasures of all kinds, found underwater, underground and in attics.

Another attraction that has been a popular draw is the Tuesdays in the Garden events at the Anderson Japanese Gardens. Each Tuesday starting in May, people are invited to pack a picnic basket, enjoy the natural beauty of the garden and listen to live music.

Another family-oriented attraction is the Friday Night Flix, a series of free outdoor movies shown in Davis Park June through August. There is free popcorn for the kids and other refreshments sold by local vendors.

The Rockford Convention and Visitors Bureau has a staff of three salespeople working to draw sports tournaments and conventions to Rockford as well. The team has been successful in drawing soccer, softball and other sports tournaments to Rockford, which is hoped to fill up local hotels and restaurants with fans and athletes.

Other attractions that keep visitors coming to Rockford include the BMO Harris Bank Center, formerly the Metro Center, which hosts concerts, sporting events and special events; the Coronado Theater, which has hosted comedians such as Jerry Seinfeld, musicians such as Willie Nelson, and other performances; and the Rockford Aviators baseball team.

Monica Krysztopa, executive director of Visit Beloit, says tourism is a very important ingredient in the growing economy in the Stateline Area.

"Visitors spend money at our restaurants, at our stores, at our hotels and in the community," she said.

Krysztopa said Beloit has some new attractions that it is hoped will bring even more visitors to the area, and several existing attractions that are sure to continue drawing people to the community.

The Castle Performing Arts Center is hoped to be Beloit's newest tourist attraction. Formerly the First Presbyterian Church, 501 Prospect St., the Castle will host movies during the Beloit International Film Festival, as well as musical and theatrical performances.

Also there are high hopes for the recreational/bike trails in the Stateline Area. South Beloit recently received funding that will complete a 1.4-mile gap in the South Beloit bike path that would link it to

the Beloit bike path. There also are efforts to extend the Beloit bike path north to Janesville's bike path.

Beloit also recently was awarded a state Joint Effort Marketing grant that will be used to promote Beloit's Got Art! event planned for June. The expanded event, planned for June 5 - 15, will be highlighted by the annual Edge of the Rock Plein Air event, when artists gather to create paintings of the scenery along the Rock River.

There are the tried-and-true attractions in Beloit that keep bringing people to the community, Krysztopa said.

The Beloit Snappers minor league baseball team continues to keep Beloit on the minds of baseball fans throughout the Midwest. This year the Snappers season starts in April.

The Farmers Market in downtown Beloit, held each Saturday from June through October, also draws hundreds of people from the region.

But Krysztopa said one of the most important attractions for visitors to the community is the people. "The people and the business owners are all very friendly and welcoming to visitors," she said.

In the Janesville area, there seems to be a trend of increased visitors, according to Christine Rebout, executive director of the Janesville Convention and Visitors Bureau.

She said the area has seen more group travel and meeting and convention travelers to the Janesville area. And some of the traditional crowd pleasing attractions have continued to grow in popularity.

"The Rotary Botanical Gardens blew away all of its previous attendance numbers with the holiday light show this year," Rebout said.

The holiday light show in the Rotary Botanical Gardens drew about 13,000 visitors this holiday season, up from the previous year's numbers of about 10,000 visitors.

A popular attraction in the Rotary Botanical Gardens is the "Here Comes the Sun" garden art project. Artists will take plywood sun forms to create art to be displayed May 12 through Sept. 6. In September, 36 sun pieces will be put up for auction.

Another attraction in Janesville that is expected to draw visitors is the Lincoln-Tallman Home. Currently, the historic home features the Aladdin Lamp Exhibit, which will run until May 24. The display features light fixtures and lamps created by the Aladdin Lamps company.

