

'Future of Tourism' outlines city's opportunities

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What Americans really need is a good vacation.

So says Wisconsin Tourism Secretary Stephanie Klett, keynote speaker at Tuesday night's "Future of Tourism" event sponsored by Visit Beloit. About a hundred invited guests listened to four speakers talk about good things going on in Beloit and how that can translate into tourism opportunities and improve quality of life.

The dinner and presentation was held at the Ironworks Hotel in downtown Beloit.

"People right now need a vacation more than ever," Klett said. "Seven years ago the United States passed Japan as the hardest-working nation, averaging over 50 hours a week."

She said the typical American worker has earned 14 vacation days each year, but most take less because it's harder to get away from jobs where staffing may have been downsized. Other workers, she said, may be concerned about losing a job if they are away more.

By contrast, some of the top traveling populations around the world take generous amounts of vacation time. Klett said Canadians average taking "six vacations a year — not six days a year, six vacations a year."

Brazilians comprise a fast emerging tourism target, Klett said, because by law they enjoy 30 vacation days annually.

"And they take it," she said.

Tourism is big business for Wisconsin, growing by \$2 billion in recent years and supporting enterprises employing more than 180,000 people. Klett said major initiatives for the state tourism department will be to pursue making Wisconsin an international travel destination and, closer to home, working with businesses to emphasize superior customer service.

Especially in an age of instant messaging and social media, Klett said customers can recognize and reward great service. But customers also can spread information far and wide about their bad experiences with businesses. The tourism department operates programs to promote exceptional customer service and help businesses train staff.

The evening featured several speakers, including Beloit City Manager Larry Arft who gave a presentation on key improvements across the city in recent years.

Arft said Beloit is gaining a reputation as “the gem of the Rock River Valley” because of its City Center improvements, which have leveraged both public projects and private investment. The emphasis, he said, has been on quality sustainable development designed to enhance Beloit’s quality of life.

“Our economy has been completely repurposed from the old gray metal industries that suffered much in the 1980s and 1990s,” Arft said, highlighting growth in the Gateway Business Park, the Eclipse Center makeover, rehabilitation of the Ironworks, downtown redevelopment and more.

“There are not a lot of vacancies in downtown Beloit today,” he said.

Rob Gerbitz, president of Hendricks Commercial Properties, gave a presentation on the company’s wide-ranging projects in the Beloit area and elsewhere. HCP is the driving force behind the Phoenix Building, the Ironworks complex and more. The projects are improving Beloit’s prospects for the future, Gerbitz said.

“We want to have 3,000 employees at the Ironworks,” he said. “We’re over 1,000 now.”

Janyce Fadden, executive-in-residence at the University of North Alabama’s College of Business, spoke to the audience about what she called “strategic doing,” stressing the importance of community stake-holders taking responsibility for driving growth and improvement.

Fadden several times pointed to completed and ongoing projects in Beloit, saying the community was demonstrating strategic doing and, in the process, becoming a model for other cities.

The event was hosted by Monica Krysztopa, executive director of Visit Beloit.