

TRAVEL-RELATED BUSINESSES BOOM IN BELOIT

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Hillary Gavan/Beloit Daily News (From left): Stephanie Ashley-Hoppe, area general manager for Geronimo Hospitality, Jonathan Webster, vice president of lodging for Geronimo Hospitality and Karen Niffenegger, general manager of Hotel Goodwin, gather for a photo in front of the future Goodwin Hotel slated to open on Aug. 1. More out-of-towners continue to seek lodging in Beloit.

BELOIT - With Rock County tourism volume increasing, sales at Beloit hotels and restaurants continue to grow with some businesses undergoing expansion projects to accommodate travelers.

According to figures released by the Wisconsin Department of Tourism on Friday, Rock County was ranked 11 out of 72 counties for tourism. Total business sales associated with travel and tourism in Rock County grew from \$384.2 million in 2016 to \$398.5 million in 2017, a 3.70 percent increase.

"Ultimately we believe Beloit is becoming and will be the premier dining destination location in the region, and we are committing a lot of resources and manpower on accomplishing it," said Geronimo Hospitality Group Chief Operating Officer Jeff Whiteman.

Geronimo Hospitality Group oversees Lucy's #7 Burger Bar, Ironworks Golf Lab, Merrill & Houston's Steak Joint, Ironworks Hotel, the Beloit Club and the Eclipse Center.

With high occupancy levels at the Ironworks Hotel and sales increasing at all Geronimo properties, Whiteman said the company saw a need in the market for increased lodging and accompanying niche market businesses.

Hotel Goodwin and the Velvet Buffalo Café will add 34 rooms and a new restaurant to 419 Pleasant St. this summer, with a planned opening Aug. 1.

Another new restaurant - Truk't, a taco, tequila and whiskey establishment - will be opening at the corner of Grand and Pleasant avenues in the former Rivals sports bar by the end of the summer. The northern side of the building will be home to Blue Collar Coffee Co.

Geronimo's also has plans to open Bessie's Diner in Southern Wisconsin Regional Airport in early July.

Hotel Goodwin General Manager Karen Niffenegger, said people are pleasantly surprised when they come to Beloit.

"It's fun to showcase Beloit to them because they are in awe of what we have to offer," she said.

"People are getting to know and recognize Beloit," added Stephanie Ashley-Hoppe, area general manager for Geronimo Hospitality.

Jonathan Webster, vice president of lodging for Geronimo Hospitality, said Beloit College continues to provide increasing numbers of visitors. Alumni who come back to Beloit can see the evolution of the downtown and spread the word about it, attracting more students and families.

Demand for hotel rooms also is driving growth around the Hampton Inn, 2700 Cranston Road, Beloit, according to Lance Schaefer, the president of Everest Hospitality LLC, the company responsible for management and operation of the Hampton Inn and Home2 Suites.

Since the 96-room Hampton Inn was built in 2011, the hotel has experienced increased numbers of business travelers. When it began selling out during the week, it launched plans to build Home2 Suites, an extended stay hotel with suites containing kitchenettes and separate sitting and bedroom areas. Clients were saying they needed longer stays in Beloit and wanted the added amenities of a more homelike stay such as room for storage and the ability to prepare meals.

Ground was broken in late fall of 2017 for the 102-suite hotel and it will open in late summer of 2018. In addition to suites which can accommodate up to six guests, the new site features a 1,460-square-foot meeting room, boardroom, two outdoor patios and more.

Although corporate travel is its staple of business, Schaefer said people come to Beloit for Beloit College activities and the Beloit International Film Festival. Thanks to the addition of Home2 Suites, there will be a total of 198 rooms open for visitors.

Nathan Lipps, manager of La Casa Grande and Domenico's restaurants, said he's been seeing more customers from the Rockford and Milwaukee areas. With the restaurants being 10 minutes away from the interstate, many people stop off for a bite to eat on the way to Wisconsin Dells or other cities. The Beloit International Film Festival in February also brings in a big crowd as well as the Beloit Farmers Market every Saturday.

"We get a lot of people who will park here, go to the market and then come eat a meal," he said.

Lipps commended Beloit's hotels for referring customers to local restaurants. He said travelers like supporting local businesses and eating at unique restaurants.

Jon Pingel, manager of the Rock Bar & Grill, agreed tourists prefer locally owned establishments as opposed to chain restaurants. "We broke sales records last year and are expecting to do the same this year," Pingel said.

Pingel said he sees tourists all year. He recalled someone from St. Louis, Missouri, who had randomly picked Beloit as a spot to visit and was staying at the Ironworks Hotel. In addition to getting a large amount of customers from Rockford, he said tourists come through all around the country. Although some of the visitors may have had negative perceptions about Beloit prior to arrival, those quickly change when they see the developments downtown and to Riverside Park. He said people like coming back to the Rock, because of its great view of the Rock River and ever changing craft beer collection.

Because of the Rock's sales success it will be doing outdoor renovations this summer, building a new pavilion which can hold up to 200 people with a mini bar.

Meanwhile, a Holiday Inn Express at 3022 Ford St. could have site plans approved within three weeks, according to Building Services Director Drew Pennington. Plans are to break ground on the 124-room hotel later this summer.