

# Year in Review

2020 HAMILTON COUNTY, INDIANA

*People | Place | Prosperity*



JUST NORTH  
OF INDY

hamilton  
county  
tourism  
inc



*tourism together*

ARCADIA | ATLANTA | CARMEL | CICERO | FISHERS | NOBLESVILLE | SHERIDAN | WESTFIELD



## Letter from the President

*The resolve of a community is demonstrated in a time of crisis.*

Watching our county's non-profit partners organize as the pandemic unfolded to support food distribution, senior assistance, housing support and delivery of healthcare services was inspiring.

Seeing our county's leadership, emergency management and health department services spring into action for preparedness after years of training was reassuring.

But watching our hard-working hospitality industry partners struggle during lockdown, work to adapt their delivery of services, readapt as the state gradually reopened and totally reinvent their operations has moved us beyond words.

Like our hospitality partners, reduced revenues have meant saying good-bye to many very talented staff members. It is estimated that as much as 50 percent of the travel industry is now unemployed. Recovery make take until at least 2024. There is no doubt the hospitality industry has been most impacted by this crisis.

The resilience of the youth sports travel market and our community's long-term investments in outstanding outdoor recreational opportunities have made Hamilton County a safe option for travel-starved visitors this year. It has helped make a terrible situation more bearable and prevented even deeper local economic losses.

We look forward to a time when people are once again moved by a performance at The Center for the Performing Arts, rock it out at Ruoff Music Center and enjoy mimosas and brunch on the Nickel Plate Express. Until then, stay safe and support local hospitality businesses as often as you are able. It's important.

### **Brenda Myers**

President & CEO  
Hamilton County Tourism, Inc.





## Hospitality

Like other destinations around the globe, Hamilton County's tourism industry faced a crisis like no other this year. At the center of the chaos were hotels witnessing record low occupancy rates. By the time the shelter-in-place orders were lifted, hotels had implemented new booking, cleaning and breakfast procedures to meet recommended guidelines.

No destination is the same, so recovery will not be the same. Hamilton County's tourism industry will likely recover at a different pace than other areas. For example, at the start of the shelter-in-place mandates, Hamilton County's hotel occupancy rate fell the furthest in central Indiana, primarily due to the losses of weekday room sales. While our hotels normally benefit from corporate weekday visitors, the new remote-work policies enacted by most businesses halted these important overnight stays. On the bright side, Hamilton County's strong sports travel market pushed weekend hotel occupancy to some of the highest in the nation, and those who needed a nearby getaway found the county a safe option for an overnight respite over the summer and into fall.

### RESILIENCY AND RECOVERY INDICATORS

- Two hotels out of 42 in Hamilton County closed temporarily this summer but are now open.
- Two new hotels opened this year, the Autograph Collection Hotel Carmichael and Home2 Suites by Hilton, both in Carmel. The Carmichael enjoyed the national spotlight for its unique boutique styling.
- Hamilton County's weekend hotel occupancy has ranged from 9.8% to 99% during the pandemic, with weekdays still finding hotels only selling about one-third of available rooms.

## Attractions

Hamilton County's attractions were hit equally hard with the pandemic. Many of the organizations that bring entertainment, culture and vibrancy to our communities went dark during the lock-down and remain challenged to present traditional performances even at year-end. The Center for the Performing Arts and Live Nation's Ruoff Music Center suffered the loss of an international touring industry forced to stay at home. The joy of listening to a favorite artist live and up close is missed. The Ruoff crew got creative with outdoor drive-in concerts this summer, which were a hit, and other theaters moved to virtual programming. It's likely hungry audiences will see more of their creativity in the future as they work to bring concerts back to our lives in some way.

### RESILIENCY AND RECOVERY INDICATORS

- Primarily outdoor attractions like Conner Prairie were able to open with limited capacity and worked to re-shape important fall and holiday experiences to ensure safety while still having fun.
- Topgolf also re-opened when it could and its unique private experience areas with weather-resistant outdoor engagement provided a welcome entertainment option.
- The Nickel Plate Express pivoted from running brunch and themed trains to smaller caboose experiences as a way to support one of the county's newest attractions.
- Parks are always popular in Hamilton County – with many unique venues available – but popularity grew exponentially as people rushed to get outdoors as soon as weather permitted. The White River Canoe Company experienced record crowds enjoying kayaks, canoes, and tubes.

## Restaurants

Hamilton County restaurants pivoted from inside experiential dining to quick and easy take-out. Some even offered take-and-bakes and grocery store supplies. Mouth-watering Instagram photos showcased their kitchens' daily creations, which kept us coming back for more. And while winter is traditionally a slower time for restaurants, this year the pandemic winter looms even larger. Many restaurants are innovating with heaters, fire pits and wind screens, hoping that the kind of easy outdoor dining found at ski resorts translates here.

### RESILIENCY AND RECOVERY INDICATORS

- Hamilton County restaurants participate in The Hoosier Hospitality Promise, a commitment to health, safety and extra cleanliness to keep guests and employees safe.
- The take-and-bake pivot by restaurants began as a way to keep businesses alive by supplementing home cooks exhausted from dishing out three meals a day, but evolved into numerous supper clubs and specialty food purveyors that now entice weary diners with options to heat and serve.
- Even a pandemic couldn't stop Tenderloin Tuesdays™ mid-summer as restaurants and residents hungered for a tradition. Hamilton County Tourism used the annual promotion to encourage residents to consider takeout mid-week.
- As 2020 began to wind down, restaurant closures began, bringing tears over the losses. Bloomberg News reports that as many as one-third of restaurants may close in 2020-2021.



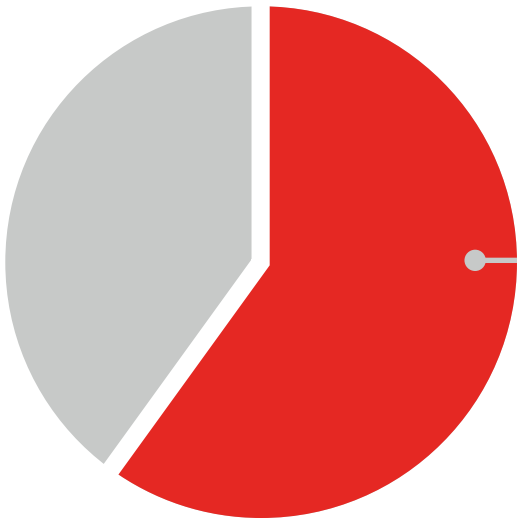


# The Power of Youth Sports

While the pandemic rewound Hamilton County Tourism’s hotel revenue back to 2012’s level, the crisis also revealed the resiliency of youth sports travel. *Time Magazine* reported youth sports to be a \$15 billion market, and industry leaders count youth sports travel to be \$9 billion of that total. Historically, youth sports bounce back from recession and crisis quickly, but everyone was surprised at how quickly it recovered in the wake of COVID-19. It is estimated that sports travel was likely the main contributor to the sale of more than 75,000 hotel rooms in the county, even though the season was compressed and events curtailed. And no other facility in the nation proved that resiliency quite like Grand Park. The ability of this nationally recognized icon of youth sports to safely attract teams from across the nation, host new lacrosse tournaments and reschedule baseball well into the fall, lifted the entire central Indiana region’s hotel industry out of its steep decline.

## RESILIENCY AND RECOVERY INDICATORS

- July and August 2020 were the biggest months on record at Grand Park as eager sports event planners relocated tournaments there at reduced capacity.
- Forest Park Aquatic Center safely hosted the 2020 AAU Diving National Championship in August when Texas and Florida could not commit.
- Baseball tournaments in Cicero were busy this summer with teams from Ohio and Illinois traveling to compete.
- While golf got off to a slow start due to restrictions placed because of COVID-19, individual rounds of golf were incredible for 2020. Being outdoors brought comfort to people, allowing them to get out and golf.



Of the \$15 billion national youth sports market,  
**\$9 BILLION CAME FROM YOUTH SPORTS TRAVEL**  
*According to WinterGreen Research*





Tree Planting in Carmel for World Habitat Day



River Installation



Staff Volunteering

# Working Together

Hamilton County Tourism's core mission is to influence travel to Hamilton County, which comes from our sports visitors, meetings and conferences, leisure weekenders, wedding parties, golf groups and more. With travel halted and lives disrupted because of the virus, we knew we needed to support community, care for people and build confidence. At the height of the crisis, Hamilton County Tourism refocused its expertise to support and care for the people in our cities and towns.

With leadership support from our governance team, the Hamilton County Convention and Visitor Commission and Hamilton County Tourism, Inc. Board, we will continue to support community first.

## GIVING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

- Created LoveHamiltonCounty.com to bring resources and information to our partners and to list businesses that remained open.
- Participated in the county's daily crisis management briefings and promoted safe hotel options for our first responders, hospital heroes and at-risk families.
- Participated in supporting the Hamilton County Community Organizations Active in Disaster communications efforts.
- Mounted a Fort Wayne summer campaign titled "Oh so, OPEN!" that highlighted outdoor experiences and supported it with TV and Facebook advertising.
- Delivered a "safe" fall road trip campaign and supported it with Facebook advertising.
- Hosted a series of online webinars focusing on best practices and economic information for restaurants, hotels, attractions and tourism recovery.
- Created a learning library on diversity, equity and inclusion and took HCT team members through an implicit bias training session.
- Facilitated \$300,000 in CARES fund reimbursements of COVID-19 sanitization expenses for our sports programs and attractions.
- Facilitated \$250,000 in CARES fund reimbursements for holiday advertising to support local business.
- Encouraged Hamilton County tourism businesses to participate in The Hoosier Hospitality Promise, a commitment to health, safety and extra cleanliness to keep guests and employees safe.
- Assisted in advocating for the hospitality industry relief through the Indiana Tourism Association and US Travel Association.
- Expanded research by adding to existing geo-location intelligence acquisition to help community leaders understand activity in their business, downtown and hospitality corridors.





# Looking Ahead

Economists continue to disagree over when recovery or sustained recovery activity will occur for the tourism industry, although most, in general, expect recovery by 2024. As we are discovering, much of it depends upon the diversity of the travel product within the destination. A survey of our community, leadership and tourism business partners helped inform Hamilton County Tourism’s recovery efforts over the next two years.

## GOALS FOR RECOVERY

- Increase confidence and resiliency among consumers and industry partners.
- Increase safe visitation to Hamilton County to provide economic relief to the industry.
- Revitalize Hamilton County Tourism’s operations and culture.

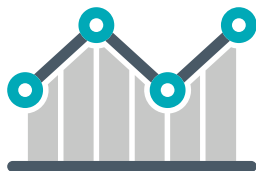
## PRIORITIES FOR RECOVERY



Drive sports tourism business and tournaments to Grand Park and other Hamilton County sports facilities.



Promote Hamilton County’s tourism industry—hotels, restaurants, retail, attractions, events—as open and safe for business and leisure travel.



Share market intelligence, trends and analysis to help business and community compete.



Revitalize the culture and operations of Hamilton County Tourism to maintain safety, retain talent and optimize functionality.



Take actions to improve social justice and environmental sustainability.



Conner Prairie



The Autograph Collection by Marriott Hotel Carmichael



Carmel Farmers Market

## HAMILTON COUNTY TOURISM STAFF

### **SANDY ALLEN**

Sales Manager

### **CHRIS KERSTIENS**

Technology Manager

### **SARAH BILLMAN**

Assistant Director of Visitor Experience

### **ASHLEY LEDFORD**

Director of Marketing & Promotions

### **SARAH BUCKNER**

Tourism Manager

### **JORDAN MUSALL**

Data Intelligence Manager

### **BETSY EKELOF**

Director of Operations

### **BRENDA MYERS**

President/CEO

### **KELLI JENKINS**

Creative Services Manager

### **KAREN RADCLIFF**

VP/Chief Strategy Officer

### **LAURA JOHNS**

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### **TINA RODGERS**

Director of Resources

### **LAURA KELNER**

Director of Sales

### **KATIE UTKEN**

Marketing & Communications Manager



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