

SHORES & ISLANDS OHIO
ANNUAL REPORT 2023
Larry Fletcher – President/CEO

As was the case the past two years coming out of Covid, 2023 was another strong year for our region's tourism industry. Although not as pronounced when comparing metrics from 2022 to 2021, lodging tax; sales tax; overall room occupancy; and room rates were up over last year.

Where we realized significant increases in 2023 vs. 2022 was with metrics associated with engagement with visitors and prospective visitors. Our welcome centers in Sandusky and Port Clinton both launched several new initiatives designed to increase foot traffic. Bringing website optimization in-house combined with new strategies with our digital marketing efforts resulted in record-setting website growth. With the release of several new social media campaigns, we saw associated increases in the engagement level on our main platforms. Our "fan base" continues to grow year over year.

Following an extensive review process at the end of 2022, we began the year with two new marketing agency partners. Toledo-based Communica was retained to handle general creative focus and out-of-market promotion, and Sandusky-based Tandem Media took on in-market and resident engagement activities. Both organizations ushered in new methods of reaching our target markets and will continue to refine our campaigns moving forward.

Many 2023 activities were focused on providing additional service to our partners. We added new opportunities for our partners to benefit from enhanced promotion on our website, created a website portal to allow for uploading and downloading photos and content, worked with our region's chambers of commerce and Main Street organizations to structure annual support packages, and continued to provide a high level of support funding through our grant programs.

Due to strong lodging tax collections in both Shores & Islands counties, we were able to budget in 2024 to sustain this partner support at a high level as well as increase our marketing and destination development investment levels. This increase will allow us to explore new strategies for promoting and enhancing the destination.

It is going to be a very exciting 2024 with the solar eclipse, Cedar Point's new *Top Thrill 2* roller coaster, western basin fishing at all-time highs, the Sandusky State Theatre reopening, and many other new activities and visitor opportunities across the region. We look forward to continuing promoting and enjoying all our area has to offer as an ideal place to visit, live, and work.

I wish to thank the Shores & Island staff team for the hard work in 2023 and the Erie and Ottawa County Commissioners for their support. Also, our board members for their time and guidance over the past year: Lee Alexakos, Mike Barr, Sara Booker, Wendy Chambers, Gretchen Colón, Billy Criscione, Emily Dunfee, David Dunn, Jude Hammond, Amy Hoffman, Jeff Hoffman, Brian Huston, Peter Huston, Paul Jeris, Gary Lickfelt, Kimberly Kaufman, Nicole Kochensparger, Brad Ohlemacher, Brian Peiffer, Steve Poggiali, Swathi Ravichandran, Carolyn Rodenhauser, Amy Roldan, Cecelia Ruta, Raffaele Ruta, Brian Shanle, Commissioner Pat Shenigo, Chris Singerling, James Sortino, Lisa Sortino, McKenzie Spriggs, Commissioner Mark Stahl, Jim Stouffer, and Eric Wobser.

Following are some of our major activities and accomplishments from 2023.

- Continued to refine our partnership program by offering additional benefits and promotion opportunities. Increased the number of individual partners from 192 to 212 and the ways these partners engage with us from 342 to 396.
- Initiated a speaker series, local art installations, book signings, and other methods of increasing Welcome Center engagement. Attracted 12,959 visitors to the Port Clinton Welcome Center, a 37% increase over 2022. Attracted 13,673 visitors to the Sandusky Welcome Center, a 172% increase over 2022.
- Increased overall social media engagement over 2022 levels across Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, and TikTok by 7.4% to 344,267 followers/likers.
- Increased website activity over 2022 levels across all metric categories including:
Visits: 1,737,217 / + 8%
Engaged Visitors: 1,168,731 / + 23%
Page Views: 4.53M / + 47%
- Shores & Islands Ohio was recognized by SportsEvents Magazine in their annual Reader's Choice Awards with First Place for All-Star Sports Destination Partner. We also received two marketing awards in the "Community Engagement" category at the Ohio Travel Association fall conference.
- Completed a partnership agreement with Greater Sandusky Partnership, a new regional economic development collaborative that will be working with S&IO on numerous issues regarding advocacy, destination enhancement, workforce development, and other items of shared importance.
- Hosted the inaugural S&IO *Media Marketplace* event in May. 31 S&IO business partners exhibited and had the opportunity to meet with and interact with the 42 travel writers and online content creators in attendance. We hosted 13 additional travel writers/influencers over the year to write stories and social campaigns about the region. Over the year we tracked 1,056 positive media features about activities and events in the region.
- Began a new marketing initiative that "geo-fenced" attendees to 79 local events across the year to serve them promotional messages. We also used the same strategy at four out-of-market trade shows we attended to encourage show-goers to visit our booth.
- Our Group Accounts team engaged with 131 meeting/event/sports groups over the year through RFP distribution, providing services in the destination, grants, or other benefits. We attended 15 group-related trade shows/meetings and four leisure trade shows. 161 appointments were held with planners across the group trade shows/meetings.
- Numerous promotion efforts and partner information sessions for the April 8, 2024 solar eclipse were launched early in the year and continued throughout 2023. A dedicated website page: SHORESandISLANDS.com/solar-eclipse debuted April 4 and continues to be a highly visited resource for a list of area events and details about the eclipse and where and how to view it safely.

- S&IO Ohio was a sponsor and also had representation at the August Ohio Chamber of Commerce Policy Conference, held in our region for the first time. This event attracted several hundred attendees including state legislators, legislative aides, sponsor representatives, and advocates for various concerns. We assisted with a golf outing and educational boating trip. This conference will return to our region in 2025.
- In conjunction with OCIC, the Port Clinton Chamber of Commerce, and others, we worked with ODOT District 2 to mitigate negative impact to businesses from construction on SR 2 and 53N in Ottawa County. These efforts will continue throughout 2024.
- In partnership with the City of Sandusky, a second three-year contract with IRONMAN 70.3 was signed for 2025-2027 with two one-year extension clauses; the 2024 event is already booked. The event was named by Triathlete Magazine as one of 11 “Best 70.3 Events in the U.S.”
- Our Visitors Experiences team had a presence at 23 community festivals and events across the region. We also participated in two community clean-up related activities and several job fairs. In addition, we gave 20 educational presentations to various groups over the year and members of the Shores & Islands staff team served on 27 local, regional, state, or national boards/committees.
- We launched *Chronolog* citizen science installations across the region with 10 locations confirmed, four of which were online at the end of the year. Accessible at www.chronolog.io.