

SHORES & ISLANDS OHIO
ANNUAL REPORT 2024
Larry Fletcher – President/CEO

The theme for our annual meeting in April 2024 was *Grow With Us*. While we talked about many of the major accomplishments over the previous year, we also acknowledged our success had been amplified greatly by the continuous growth of our region's tourism industry and the achievements made possible by establishing new partnerships and strengthening existing ones.

Despite many successes in our organization and growth in new opportunities for visitors, our region's 2024 tourism impact metrics showed lodging occupancy flat compared to 2023 and associated lodging tax just slightly up. Sales tax, also a measure of the health of our tourism economy, was down about 1% compared to 2023 in Erie County and 3% down in Ottawa.

To a certain degree this was expected as 2021-2023 set new records for visitation to Erie and Ottawa Counties. These were the years many in the tourism industry called the time of "revenge travel" as the world emerged from Covid restrictions, with 2024 being a year of normalization for our industry.

Furthermore, in 2024 the region's tourism economy saw pressure from two diametrically opposed factors: some people spending less on travel due to inflation, and others choosing to splurge on "bucket-list trips" and other higher-cost activities and destinations.

The good news is that tourism industry trend reports are showing that in 2025 the consumer intends to travel more often and spend more on travel. Many consumer surveys report that "Travel" is the answer given when people are asked what discretionary purchase is most important to them. They want to explore new destinations and indulge in new experiences.

With the many new visitor offerings that came online in the Shores & Islands in 2024, and a strong lineup of new attractions and activities being added this year, the region is well-positioned to capitalize on these travel trends.

Read on to learn how our organization continued to drive the tourism economy in 2024 and amplified that success through strong partnerships. Also, get a look at some of the plans for continuing that momentum in 2025.

I wish to thank all on the Shores & Island staff team for the hard work in 2024, also the Erie and Ottawa County Commissioners and our hundreds of tourism industry partners for their support, and our board members for their time and guidance over the past year: Lee Alexakos, Kathy Barbee, 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, Meredith Klun, Nicole Kochensparger, Erin Lineham, Gavin Longer, Caleb McGeorge, Will Moore, Brad Ohlemacher, Brian Peiffer, Steve Poggiali, Swathi Ravichandran, Carolyn Rodenhauser, Amy Roldan, Cecelia Ruta, Brian Shanle, Commissioner Pat Shenigo, Chris Singerling, James Sortino, Lisa Sortino, McKenzie Spriggs, Commissioner Mark Stahl, Jim Stouffer, and Eric Wobser

- We launched many new initiatives in 2024 to increase our ability to attract visitors and provide support to the communities, businesses, and residents we serve. Some of these are:
 - A “Partner Portal” that allows businesses and organizations access to our website to enter and update details on their operations and events.
 - S&IO website and social media advertising opportunities were made available to partners.
 - Launched *The SHORE Line* Podcast that promotes local businesses and events.
 - Expanded community events in both of our Welcome Centers.
 - Expanded S&IO and Lake Erie Love-themed retail offerings in both Welcome Centers.
 - Received *Certified Autism Center* designations for both Welcome Centers.
 - Installed our first underwater webcam at Castalia State Fish Hatchery.
- Several key initiatives in 2024 were related to the April 8 solar eclipse. Over a year in planning culminated on that day when tens of thousands of guests across the region generated tens of millions in economic impact by pushing early April lodging occupancy and room rates to unprecedented levels. Our website eclipse page was the main regional information resource, and more than 165,000 sessions were tracked to that page. We promoted over 60 special events in communities throughout the region, distributed nearly 60,000 pairs of solar glasses, and after the event collected more than 15,000 to recycle.
- Out-of-market digital and social advertising in 2024 generated 62.1 million impressions, 439,293 clicks to our website, and 120,000 conversions (a combination of outbound partner website clicks and tracked visits to the region). We continued to invest a larger percentage of our budget in promoting mid-week and off-peak times of the year. In-market promotions focusing on special event promotion generated 15.2 million impressions and 51,599 clicks to the website. 174 unique events were promoted to our visitors and residents in 2024.
- Website activity increased compared to 2023 as follows:
 - Total Visits: 2.1M / +20.9% over 2023
 - Unique Users: 1.4M / +22.9% over 2023
 - Clicks to Partner Pages: 584K / +15.4% over 2023
 - Outbound Clicks to Partner Websites: 359.3K / +29% over 2023
- Developing new methods of adding value to partnership with Shores & Islands and being able to better track and communicate that value helped bring 48 new partners on board over the year.
- Social media following on our major platforms (Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn) increased 4.2% over 2023 levels to 360,234.
- Our new podcast platform, *The SHORE Line*, outperformed our projections and as of 12.31.24 had a subscriber base of 1,163 and total episode downloads of 6,385.
- In 2024, the third year of our Destination Development Grant program, we awarded nearly \$545,000 in grants to 30 projects in communities across the Shores & Islands Ohio region.
- We launched two new adventure trails to add to the eight already being offered. These trails provide visitors with themed itineraries linking up destinations across the region. Newly added were the Heritage Trail for history lovers and the Fine Arts Trail.

- Our Group Sales team attended 20 trade shows in 2024 from which 237 leads were acquired. Adding leads from other methods, we distributed 406 leads to partners over the year. In addition, we provided various services to over 80 groups while in the market and awarded nearly \$250,000 in meeting, sports, and event grants to 52 recipients and seven chambers of commerce to assist with their event promotion.
- We received five awards at the Ohio Travel Association's annual marketing honors, the RUBY Awards. First-place awards were for our "It's a Shore Thing" summer promotional video, and our underwater webcam at the Castalia State Fish Hatchery. Three Citation of Excellence awards were for our Chronolog campaign, winter/spring break "Get A Wave" digital campaign, and The Shore Line podcast. During the conference, team members Ben Simon and Joe Sugalski graduated from OTA's Ohio Tourism Leadership Academy, a year-long program that provides education on numerous aspects of the tourism industry.
- Our second annual *Media Marketplace* event brought 29 partners and 39 media/influencers together for a day of networking to encourage the influencers to write about the businesses and plan in-person visits to their locations. A post-event media tour was added to get attendees immediately out to some of the partner locations. As of 12/31/24, we had tracked 118 social posts and several blog and print features from the influencers who attended. Over the year we hosted seven additional influencers for personalized visits.
- The Visitor Experiences team continued to increase our organization's visibility by having a presence at 30 different community events in Erie and Ottawa Counties. In addition, we had permanent information distribution kiosks at Kalahari, Cedar Point Sports Center, and Sports Force Parks; and Travel Guide distribution racks on the Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana Turnpikes, and at over 150 additional locations throughout Ohio and surrounding states.
- Following are some of the new ways we will be supporting our partners and the region's tourism economy in 2025:
 - Adding a website feature to allow partners to access photos, research, and other resources.
 - Establishing a dedicated marketing campaign to highlight the live and work aspects of the region.
 - Launching the *Learn Tourism* curriculum designed to develop a network of local "ambassadors" through education about economic development benefits of our region's tourism industry.
 - Working with OCIC, GSP, and the Ohio Travel Association to create a state-wide hospitality & tourism credentialing program.
 - Developing new methods to provide advocacy and support for the area J1 program.
 - Ready activities and a marketing plan to support our region's participation in *America 250*.

In addition, in Spring 2025 we'll be gathering input from our partners, community stakeholders, boards, and the staff team to develop a refreshed long-range action plan to build on our current strengths and prepare our organization for the coming years.