LAKE ERIE SHORES & ISLANDS
2019 Annual Report
Larry Fletcher, President
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While 2019 marked the 14th year of the Lake Erie Shores & Islands partnership, it was the first year that all staff team members were employed by the same corporate organization. Prior to this, some were employed by the Ottawa County Visitors Bureau and others by the Erie County Visitors & Convention Bureau.

We now operate under a new 501 C6 corporation called Lake Erie Shores & Islands with a new board of directors. The two visitors bureau boards are still in existence with a focus on allocating of funds for the new organization and also acting on any county-specific initiatives.

Over the course of the past year the board's main committees, Marketing; Finance; Advocacy; and Workforce Development; met several times to continue refining the policies and procedures for the new organization, set goals, and other such tasks. A Governance Committee was also formed to evaluate future board and committee candidates.

Along with fine tuning the board's responsibilities and focus, in 2019 we also completed a thorough evaluation of our staff departmental/reporting structure. Through this we organized our staff into three main teams: operations, communications, and group accounts. Each team has director and manager level positions and clearly defined roles. In addition, we updated our employee manual and standardized training for all employees.

2019 was the second full year of our partnership with our advertising agency, Marcus Thomas LLC. Their expertise in marketing strategies continued to produce strong results as shown later in this report. Last year we increased our budget and focus on attracting the group market: conferences, events, reunions, motorcoach tours, etc. Many of the same strategies that have been successful in attracting the leisure travel markets are now being used to attract groups.

Along with working to attract and provide service to visitors, members of our staff team continue to support the efforts of numerous boards and committees in our region, the state, and in some cases nationally. Examples are the Ohio Travel Association, Ohio Association of CVBs, Lake Erie Foundation, Meeting Professionals International, Main Street Port Clinton, Erie County Economic Development Corporation, Ottawa County Improvement Corporation, and many others. Many of our board members are also sought after for their expertise and serve on numerous boards and committees.

Many thanks to our board and committee members, our partners from the tourism industry, chambers of commerce, and economic development agencies for their support over the year. Also, we appreciate the support of our county commissioners and the other elected officials who represent the areas we serve. All of these alliances are critical to fulfilling our mission that includes promoting the region not only as an ideal place to visit, but also to live and work.

Following are some of our other major activities and accomplishments from 2019.

- Erie County lodging tax collections for calendar year 2019 increased 3.6% over 2018 with total net collections of $2,959,717. Ottawa County lodging tax collections for the same period were 5.7% over 2018 with total net collections of $1,033,185.

- Visitor traffic to our two welcome centers was up over 7% to a total of 20,733. It should be noted that the Erie County Welcome Center was in a temporary location during this time as a process to renovate a new location was under way.

- We continued to refine our digital marketing strategy that targets specific audience segments with customized messaging with the main call to action being driving website traffic. As was the case last year, this approach produced strong results with 1,780,376 website session (+37% over 2018); outbound clicks from our site to tourism partner sites increasing by 23% to 343,230; and the number of website "engaged sessions" (sessions with more than two page views) up by 25% to 573,325.

- Began using a digital strategy for marketing efforts to attract groups. The campaign generated 1.4 million impressions and over 23,500 clicks to our group website. An additional lead generation campaign generated 765 leads for potential future group business.

- Increased the number of followers on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest by a combined 7% to 295,704. Also drove 54,199 visits to our website from social posts.

- Grew our monthly consumer e-newsletter audience to more than 98,000 subscribers and our semi-monthly tourism partner e-newsletter list to more than 900.

- Hosted 37 travel journalists over the course of 2019 for feature stories on a variety of topics.

- Our Group Accounts team attended 15 trade shows that generated 706 leads for future business. This department provided services to 114 group-related events in the region.

- Our Visitors Services team began conducting focused meetings with tourism industry partners to present information on services available through our organization, the value of tourism to the region, and other information that can help their businesses.

- We created a "step-on guide" program in conjunction with a group of volunteer "Ambassadors". This will provide complimentary guide services to motorcoach groups coming into the region.

- We refined both the Ottawa and Erie County grant and sponsorship programs to establish consistency in methods of judging and allocating funds. The budget for each grant program was also increased to enable us to support more events.

- Increased our support of our regional economic development organization's efforts to promote the "live" and "work" aspects of the region through a video series that told the stories of five businesses that were drawn here or chose to expand here due to various resource and quality of life attributes.

- Established the Shores & Islands Sports Advisory Council, a committee comprised of venue managers, city/village officials, hoteliers, restaurateurs, and others who have a stake in the region's sports tourism efforts. This group now meets regularly to collaborate on efforts to maximize this market segment.