

LAKE ERIE SHORES & ISLANDS ANNUAL REPORT 2021

The 2020 Shores & Islands Annual Report mentioned how Covid had forced our organization to shift many goals from those based on growing the region's tourism economy to developing strategies for how our organization and the region's tourism industry businesses could survive. However, the report also listed many reasons for optimism about the future as our region was well-positioned for quick recovery once near normal levels of travel could resume. There was an expression of hope that Covid vaccine plans that were just beginning to roll out would allow for resumption of that robust level of travel.

As we now know, vaccines eventually contributed to a reduction in travel restrictions, dropping of mask requirements and other mandates, and subsequent increased consumer confidence in travel. Over the course of 2021, especially after most state mandates were lifted in June, our organization was able to shift back to a greater level of promotion with our marketing efforts expanding consistent with the increasing number of visitor experiences that were returning across the year. Our visitors came back not only to near normal levels, but in many cases at levels never before experienced.

Evidence of this dramatic rebound is apparent from many of the metrics we track: Erie County lodging tax for calendar year 2021 was 91% above 2020 and just 2% under a very strong 2019. Ottawa County was at 54% over 2020 and 16% over 2019; calendar year 2021 sales tax collections were at record levels in both counties with Erie County 24.8% over 2020 and 17% over 2019. Ottawa County was at 20.6% over 2020 and 20% over 2019. Smith Travel Research, which tracks average lodging occupancy and room rates showed that hotel occupancy in the region in 2021 was 56% above 2020 levels and room rates were 31% above 2020; both metrics also above 2019 levels.

We also experienced increases in many Shores & Islands marketing metrics. Visits to ShoresandIslands.com in 2021 were 36% above 2020 levels, on par with 2019 with 1,743,201 visits. Links from our site out to our tourism partner sites showed about the same level of increase with 391,149 links. Our primary social media platforms attracted 10,131 new followers in 2021 making the year-end total 306,306; highest following of all Ohio tourism destinations.

Along with increased promotion, we continued supporting our tourism industry partners by advocating for and providing information about additional Covid relief funds. We also partnered on local and regional workforce issues, including advocating for efforts to safely open the border to J-1 foreign workers.

2021 was a year of several major structural initiatives for our organization. A new three-year strategic action plan was developed with input from a wide spectrum of stakeholders along with several months of work from our board and staff teams. The plan includes goals designed not only to increase visitation, but also to strengthen our organization's role in supporting economic and community development efforts, increase our focus on engaging local residents, prioritize equity and diversity, and elevate the awareness and support of the tourism industry with local and state agencies.

We also incorporated input from stakeholders across the region in branding and logo discussions last May. From this work came a new destination name, *Shores & Islands Ohio*, and a new associated logo. These elements were formally approved by our boards last fall and will officially be released this spring.

While 2021 was not without challenges, the dedication and resilience of our staff team, combined with the support of our board and committee members, tourism industry partners, and the Erie and Ottawa County Commissioners, resulted in a significant rebound for our organization and the region's tourism economy. We will work hard to continue this momentum in the new year and beyond.

Following are some of our major activities and accomplishments from 2021.

Our summer and fall digital marketing campaigns generated 29,640,665 impressions with 4,294,435 individuals taking the desired action to either click through to our website or watch a video featuring our destination. A winter campaign was initiated in January, 2022.

Our Group Accounts team attended 10 tradeshows and conducted 223 one-on-one appointments with corporate and association meeting planners, tour operators, and sports organizers. The team was directly responsible for bringing 47 groups representing 78,860 room nights to the region and provided support services to a total of 111 groups during the year. 13 groups that cancelled due to Covid have all re-scheduled for 2022 or 2023. A *Sports Discount Card* was also developed for youth sports teams.

Social media following and engagement showed growth on all platforms except Twitter. We launched a TikTok account in October that at the end of the year had 333 followers with an average of nearly 500 views per video. Social stats on major platforms as of 12.31.21 stood at:

- Facebook: 264,860 followers; up from 254,835 at the beginning of 2021
- Instagram: 24,923 followers; up from 22,103 at the beginning of 2021
- Twitter: 19,869 followers; down from 19,945 at the beginning of 2021

Our PR and Social team hosted 15 travel writers/influencers in the destination and provided assistance with images or editorial content to 27 additional writers/influencers. We tracked 406 positive media features about our region representing more than 1.7 billion potential impressions. 33 blog posts were also written for posting to our website and sharing on social media.

We reinvigorated advocacy measures related to the health of Lake Erie and our other natural resources. In July we joined the Lake Erie Charter Boat Association and Ohio Division of Wildlife in hosting the Governor; Lt. Governor; many federal, state and local elected officials; several high-ranking ODNR officials; and over a dozen outdoor writers for Fish Ohio, an event that showcases Lake Erie's outstanding fishery and the need to protect it.

Members of the Shores & Islands staff team continued to provide service to numerous boards and committees including: Ohio Travel Association, Professional Conference Management Association, North Coast Young Professionals, Sandusky Winterfest, Milan Museum, Team Ohio Sports, SportsEvents National, ECEDC, OCIC, Ohio CVB Association, Ohio Sea Grant, Lake Erie Foundation, Firelands Forward, Maritime Museum of Sandusky, Sandusky Cultural Center, Firelands Symphony, Main Street Port Clinton, Marblehead Peninsula Chamber of Commerce, Port Clinton Area Arts Council, and more.

The agreement between the Ottawa County and Erie County Visitors Bureau Boards and the Lake Erie Shores & Islands Board was renewed for another three-year period. The Ottawa County Visitors Bureau entered into a new 99-year lease with the Erie-Ottawa International Airport.

Visitor Services team activity increased across the year as people's interest in travel and associated planning accelerated. Major activities included: gathering information from more than a thousand businesses for inclusion on our website, an updated Guest Information Guide, and other visitor resources; adding more than 400 events to our website along with dozens of discount offers and lodging packages; generating/updating content for 13 experience "trails" featured on our website; developing/updating 29 specialty brochures; gathering content for the 2022 "Play & Stay" Travel Guide, and creating a "Partner Portal" on our website where our tourism industry partners can access and update information about their businesses. The team assisted 10,559 guests in our Welcome Centers and sold more than \$70,000 worth of tickets through partnerships in place with several attractions in the region.