WELL MY FRIENDS, THE TIME HAS COME. TO HAVE SOME FUN AND CARRY ON.
It’s true that we had an amazing journey together with me as the lead of your tourism bureau for the past 16 years. The successes, challenges, friendships and cheer will always be remembered. And they all made a difference for the region and our tourism growth. Thank you.
COVID-19 has become the bane of our existence. But we are finding ways to get through it. Just like the vision of the great lighthouse on the Grafton riverfront inspired by the Wright family, we are resilient folks in this part of the world. We will get through this and we have the blueprint to make this destination even better in the future.
It has been my honor and privilege to serve you in this capacity in what is sure to be one of the best jobs in the country. As my family and I go on to another chapter filled with new challenges, successes, friendships and cheer we will always cherish this place. We will be back to visit often.
I leave your ship in good working order for the next captain to set sail and you are in awesome hands until then with our current crew led by Barbara Strack and our board of directors. This bureau is your driving force to support the tide of these Great Rivers which lifts us all to new places, all year long.

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NAVIGATING THE WATERS OF 2020 HAS CERTAINLY BEEN A CHALLENGE FOR EVERYONE. When the year started we kept talking about the ‘Roaring ’20s’ and all the opportunities ahead. And starting in March boy did we hear this year roar!
While we are sad to see Brett leave, the staff at the Tourism Bureau will continue working hard to keep our area a strong destination for visitors. The Great Rivers & Routes region is no stranger to adversity and our businesses and residents know how to work together to keep pressing on. That’s what we are all doing now – moving towards a brighter tomorrow.
Keeping the Great Rivers & Routes region moving forward has been our number one goal throughout the year. Even with the on-going pandemic we have attracted visitors to the region who have enjoyed room to roam as they take to the trails and state parks, rivers and routes that make our region strong. And it looks like we may endure heightened restrictions for a bit longer. As much as possible, we all need to get out and support our local restaurants and stores during the on-going pandemic. We want our region to be strong and healthy as we emerge from this national crisis. And we are doing it by working together and keeping safety a priority.
This is what is means to be Great Rivers & Routes strong!

Interim Director • Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau
We started the year off with our annual Tourism Summit held in January at the SIUE Morris University Center. Over 250 people attended the breakfast event to celebrate the previous year’s accomplishments and recognize our 2019 award recipients:

- **BEST ATTRACTION**
  - **TREEHOUSE WILDLIFE CENTER**

- **BEST TOURISM ENHANCEMENT**
  - **EASTGATE PLAZA**

- **BEST FESTIVAL**
  - **EDWARDSVILLE ART FAIR**

- **BEST GROUP TOUR EXPERIENCE**
  - **WILLOUGHBY HERITAGE FARM**

- **EXTRAORDINARY EXCELLENCE**
  - **WORDIGRAS COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT BRIGHTON SESQUICENTENNIAL CELEBRATION**

- **TOURISM TRENDSETTER**
  - **Grafton Skytour at Aerie’s Resort**

- **SPORTS MARVEL**
  - **Alton Catfish Classic**

As bald eagles, swans and other migratory birds returned to the region for the winter, over 2,200 people flocked to the Alton Visitor Center for the annual Alton Eagle Ice Festival. Visitors enjoyed live ice and wood carving demonstrations, family-friendly games and a live eagle meet and greet. Additional activities were available at the Audubon Center at Riverlands including guided eagle watching tours.

The Alton Visitor Center was also the site of the annual Groundhog Festival where Murray the Groundhog predicted six more weeks of winter. A special thanks to the staff at Treehouse Wildlife Center for their help with both events!

February saw a record-breaking response to the Underground Railroad Tours with Dr. J Eric Robinson. The guided tours are typically held on the last Saturday of the month from February – May and September – October. However, the tours sold out so quickly that we had to add more dates to the tour calendar – which also sold out! Due to COVID-19, only the February tour dates took place.

We also had to cancel our annual Tourism Rally scheduled to take place in May at the Collinsville Aqua Park. We hosted a virtual Spirit of Travel Rally featuring some of our amazing partners.

**GREAT RIVERS & ROUTES DINING EVENTS**

**ALTON RESTAURANT WEEK** was held in January and All Star Restaurant Week was held in July, both celebrating locally owned and operated restaurants in Alton, Godfrey, Grafton, East Alton and Bethalto. Thousands of diners visited participating restaurants and picked up their commemorative Restaurant Week glasses.

The first-ever **COLLINSVILLE RESTAURANT WEEK** was held Feb. 28 – March 8. Six locally owned and operated restaurants participated offering $10 lunch and $25 dinner fixed price specials. The second annual Collinsville Restaurant Week is planned for Feb. 26 – March 7, 2021.

**GREAT RIVERS & ROUTES VISITOR CENTER STATS**

- **Visitors to Center:** 5,889
  - (Center closed in March)

- **Phone Inquiries:** 6,628

- **Visitor Guides Mailed:** 40,873

- **Welcome Bags Distributed:** 75
  - (January – February)
A social media campaign designed to showcase the resiliency and strength of local businesses and attractions kicked off in April during Illinois Stay at Home orders. Overall more than 18 Great Rivers & Routes Strong videos were created throughout the region and they were launched on the bureau’s Facebook page. Thank you to all of our partners who helped submit videos:

- Edwardsville Arts Center
- Raging Rivers Waterpark
- Chavas Mexican Restaurant
- Best Western Premier Alton
- Jersey County Business Association
- City of Collinsville, Parks & Recreation
- National Great Rivers Museum
- 1820 Col. Benjamin Stephenson House
- Grafton Harbor
- Treehouse Wildlife Center
- Crossroads Bike Tours
- Brown Bag Bistro
- Blue Ice Creamery
- Hampton Inn Litchfield
- City of Litchfield/Lake Lou Yaeger
- Lewis & Clark State Historic Site
- Willoughby Heritage Farm

We started the year by distributing more than 50,000 copies of the 2020 Travel Guide. The annual guide tells the story of our region in an expanded 116 page format. It highlights our communities, attractions, dining experiences and overnight stay opportunities. The online copy of the Travel Guide has been in the top 10 page views for the last six months. The remaining copies of the guide will be distributed in a fall edition of St. Louis Magazine. We also produced and printed updated maps for Edwardsville, Grafton and downtown Alton.

We launched the new Great Rivers & Routes website on Jan. 8. The dynamic website showcases the region through interactive maps, videos and updated website listings. The site also helped better target our niche audiences through the new Meetings, Groups, Sports and Weddings pages. We also launched new website pages for our community partners: EnjoyEdwardsville.com, ExploreCollinsville.com, EnjoyGrafton.com, JerseyCountyFair.com, GreatRiversByway.com, VisitCalhoun.com, VisitAlton.com, Lewis & Clark.com. When the stay-at-home order was issued in March, the websites became a valuable resource to share the latest COVID-19 updates and show how our businesses have rallied to safely reopen as state guidelines have changed. When the virus hit, our COVID-19 resource page had over 22,000 views.

Confluence Tower, Calhoun Ferry Company, and AltonAmphitheater.com. When the state started to reopen, we launched our Summer Never Closes video campaign highlighting outdoor adventure opportunities throughout the region. We also expanded the video series to showcase that Summer Never Closes in Collinsville, Alton, Grafton and Edwardsville/Glen Carbon.

To encourage statewide travel, the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau and 18 other state bureaus launched a new Illinois Road Trip Round-Up blog series. The blogs revolved around different weekly themes, highlighting regional attractions and businesses to readers across the state.

Through a continued partnership with Route 3 Films, we debuted our newest Local Legends videos in April: World’s Largest Catsup Bottle, Wildey Theatre, Ariston Café and Great River Road. The videos had close to 50,000 views.
Midwest Living published its 2020 Illinois Road Trip Rally and our region had a huge presence in the article. Midwest Living also published an article on the Top Things To Do In Grafton/Alton.

In June, Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site was featured in the Chicago Tribune, the result of a travel writer we hosted. The region was featured on the front cover of AAA Midwest Traveler Magazine. And the Alton Marina was featured on the front cover of the Quimby’s Cruising Guide.
OUR SALES TEAM STARTED OFF 2020 ON A STRONG NOTE by attending the American Bus Association conference in January, Connect Travel Marketplace in February and RTO Travel West in February. We conducted 70 appointments with domestic and international group tour operators and returned with strong sales leads.

We updated the Sports Playbook with our newest communities and sports venues and had plans to distribute at the Illinois Sports Huddle and the Sports ETA sales shows (both shows were later cancelled due to COVID). We also created a new Destination Guide showcasing the region’s top attractions and suggested itinerary themes. The guide was mailed to over 1,100 domestic tour operators, travel agents and group event planners throughout the country.

FROM JANUARY – JULY, WE HELPED BRING $1.3 MILLION TO THE REGION THROUGH GROUP TOURS, EDUCATIONAL FIELD TRIPS, AND SPORTING EVENTS. We also booked an additional $2.7 million in business which was later cancelled due to COVID-19. Beginning in March, we started contacting our 2020 group tour reservations and worked hard to reschedule their tours rather than cancelling. We also started receiving new sales leads from large tour operators who wanted to plan shorter distance tours to our region. FROM MARCH – JULY, WE ADDED 24 NEW GROUP TOUR LEADS AND 17 NEW SPORTS LEADS. We worked with Spencer T. Olin golf course to secure a July tournament with American Junior Golf Association. The tournament brought 350 participants and their families to the Alton area for a minimum of four days.

When COVID-19 cases started showing up in the U.S., none of us realized how dramatically our communities would be impacted. Beginning with the stay-at-home orders in March, we have seen local stores, restaurants and services shut their doors and reduce their staff. Our Bureau has also been drastically affected. In April, we had to reduce four staff positions and there has been a sharp decline in state and local funding. By compiling signature events, athletic tournaments and tour group cancellations, we have tracked at least $5.1 million in lost revenue for our region. Throughout this, our region has remained resilient as we continue to combat the effects of COVID-19. While we want this report to celebrate our hard work and the positive news from our region, we also want to acknowledge the hardship that all of our businesses and local families continue to face. Our Bureau remains committed to serving as a resource as well an advocate for our region. Together, we will stay Great Rivers & Routes Strong!
WHO WE ARE. WHAT WE DO

MISSION
Advance the overall destination experience and awareness for Madison, Macoupin, Montgomery, Jersey, Calhoun and Greene counties, in collaboration with community stakeholders, to strengthen the local economy and quality of life.

WHAT WE ASPIRE TO BE
VISION
Provide world-class destination management and marketing leadership that improves this region’s quality of life and economic vitality.

CORE VALUES
- Commitment to excellence, professionalism and fiscal responsibility
- Open and transparent communications
- Consistency and fairness in all relationships
- Encouragement of initiative, innovation, and the expression of ideas
- Promotion of collaborative and cooperative efforts with community partners and stakeholders

GREAT RIVERS & ROUTES STAFF

BARTBARA STRACK
Interim CEO/Operations & Finance Director

STEPHANIE TATE
Marketing Communications Director

KATIE BENNETT
Sales & Reporting Manager

GAIL WALLACE
Tourism Manager

MIRIAH HARING
Tourism Coordinator

JOHN HOPKINS
Board Chairperson
Hopkins Law Firm

LAUREN PATTAN
Vice Chair
Old Bakery Beer Company

KRISTI HYTEN
Secretary/Treasurer
Community Volunteer

MITCHELL BAIR
City of Collinsville

MICHAEL BARKER
Argosy Casino

KAREN BRNCIC
Alton Marina

BRIAN CAMPBELL
City of Alton, 1st Ward Alderman

KIM DURR
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

STACY FRIEDICH-HINRICHS
DoubleTree by Hilton-Collinsville

TOM GUARINO
Bella Milano

SANDY HEFNER
Jersey County Board

CAMEO HOLLAND
City of Alton

LINDA JUN
Vandalia Bus Lines

JD LORTON
Aerie’s Resort

CATHY LUTTRELL
Holiday Inn Express & Suites Edwardsville

MIKE McCORMICK
Village of Godfrey

DAVE MILLER
St. Louis Regional Airport

PATTY ROTERMUND
Best Western Premier Alton-St. Louis Area Hotel

DOUG STOTLER
Lewis & Clark Community College

ERIN VENTIMIGLIA
Tony’s Restaurant

CINDY WARKE
Gateway Convention Center