



THRIVE 2035

DESTINATION MASTER PLAN
FOR ROCKFORD AND WINNEBAGO & BOONE COUNTIES

ENERGIZED BY OUR RIVERS,
OUR COMMUNITIES WELCOME
THOSE WHO SEEK A BIGGER
LIFE ENRICHED BY ACTIVE
ADVENTURES AND VIBRANT
DOWNTOWN EXPERIENCES.



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THRIVE 2035

A VIEW OF THE FUTURE IN THE ROCK RIVER VALLEY

Our region is blessed with abundant natural resources – woodlands, wetlands, meadows and rivers – that combined with our cityscapes, villages and farms create an exceptional visitor destination and highly livable communities.

For the past year, a team of strategists and stakeholders have been collaborating on the design of a new destination vision for our region that builds on the transformational work of the past decade to further develop our waterways, greenspaces, sports facilities, main streets and downtowns.

Imagine the Rock River as a unifying thread that draws visitors and residents to its shores. From South Beloit and Rockton, through downtown Rockford and on past Chicago Rockford International Airport, the Rock flows with untapped opportunities for entertainment and recreation. Blend in the Pecatonica River to the west, Sugar River to the north and the Kishwaukee River to the east – as well as their many tributaries and creeks – and the waterways,

conservation areas and open fields of Winnebago and Boone counties are unmatched in their abundance and beauty.

Where our rivers flow through our cities and villages, we can seek developments that give visitors and residents greater and easier access to the water. Imagine vibrant gathering places, intersecting bike trails, pedestrian walkways and docks and landings. Imagine people flocking to our rivers to relax, rejuvenate and recreate.

In this future scenario, entrepreneurs and makers breathe life into small businesses, making our downtowns and main streets bustling hubs with one-of-a-kind boutiques, restaurants, coffee shops, tasting and taprooms, galleries, shops and outfitters. Imagine that these bustling hubs are developed in our rural villages and in our more metropolitan cities such as Rockford, Belvidere and Loves Park. Imagine that these areas are made even livelier by original events and activities that are sustained year after year.

With this style of development and activation, a visit to our central hub, Downtown Rockford, becomes so much more than a family outing to Stroll on State, a concert at the historic Coronado Performing Arts Center or a lively night at an IceHogs hockey game. In fact, in 2035, along with a trip to Anderson Japanese Gardens, our riverfront museum campus and Nicholas Conservatory & Gardens, Rockford's downtown core tops the list of "places to go and things to do" in the Upper Midwest.

Attracting more visitors to our region will continue to be driven by youth sports, a market position we set in motion in the mid 1980s and a leadership position we continue to hold among tournament directors, athletes and families. In the future, we will drive our sports reputation to new heights, as visitors to Winnebago and Boone counties are treated to top-notch recreational and athletic facilities, including soccer fields, golf courses, hockey rinks, aquatics centers, adventure parks and softball and baseball complexes.

As our region's communities flourish, they do so while elevating the rich heritage and culture that make the destination unique and interesting. Residents blend the best of our urban grit and rural charm to create energy and vitality that's authentically ours. All people embrace a welcoming sense of place and pride that extends across the region, while cherishing and preserving deeply personal rituals, traditions and values.

This is just the beginning! Keep exploring this Destination Master Plan, THRIVE 2035, to discover the road map built on the ideas and strategies from residents and community leaders in our two-county region. On behalf of our Steering Committee, the board and staff at GoRockford and our partners at Belvidere Chamber of Commerce, I invite you to join us in further creating the kind of place where everyone is welcome, and everyone has a chance to thrive.




John Groh
President & CEO
GoRockford

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A vertical photograph of a Japanese garden. In the foreground, there is a path of light-colored gravel with a wavy, raked pattern. To the left, a large, dark, gnarled tree branch extends from the top left corner. The background is filled with various green and autumn-colored trees. A bright sunburst effect is visible through the foliage in the upper left quadrant.

CONVENING, CONNECTING & COLLABORATING

Creating an effective long-term destination master plan isn't about short-term fixes. It takes dedicated planning and leadership to bring everyone together for exciting – and sometimes tough – conversations about what's possible.

Our THRIVE 2035 conversations started by developing a deep understanding of what stakeholders and residents want for their communities, connecting plans already in motion and working collaboratively to turn ideas into a shared vision that ensures the economic impacts of tourism benefit everyone.

This work was accomplished by a steering committee of 25 regional community leaders who provided direction, guidance and input to a team of tourism experts who analyzed assets, infrastructure, workforce, sports and recreation opportunities, stakeholder alignment and visitor and resident perceptions of the region.

Convening the community and crafting this plan would not have been possible without the leadership of the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, also known as GoRockford, and the Belvidere Chamber of Commerce. These two organizations spent years developing strong relationships and trust that supported the co-creation of a plan which is reflective of diverse perspectives for growing the vibrancy and prosperity of the region.

This Destination Master Plan is not meant to be a tactical plan, rather a high-level framework from which the communities and regional partners can elaborate and build upon. With a 10-year time frame, it is meant to be an invitation for active participation, implementation and idea generation.

In combination, these strategies reinforce one another to contribute to the overall development and success of the destination. For example, investing in tourism products helps to create compelling experiences, while enhancing connectivity and mobility supports the creation of cool, vibrant spaces and neighborhoods. When done right, the achievement of these goals will attract new talent to the region and create career opportunities which will be supported by ongoing training and development programs.

By working together, the region will THRIVE!

MASTER PLAN OBJECTIVE & CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

Development of this plan leveraged the ideas and perspectives from an intentional cross-section of individuals and organizations throughout the region. Likewise, implementation of the strategies captured here will require strong coalitions of committed people, including representation from tourism and government agencies, businesses, nonprofits, and educational and community organizations.

As such, the objective for the THRIVE 2035 Destination Master Plan is to:

Optimize the Rockford region's visitor economy to create more unified, connected and thriving neighborhoods and communities for the long-term benefit of all residents.

The themes of unity, connectedness and thriving communities — along with the need for as many residents as possible to benefit from this plan — were defined as critical priorities for THRIVE 2035.

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

To achieve the above objective and provide opportunities for shared success, participants identified these critical success factors:

REPUTATION

- Establish ongoing marketing campaigns to engage residents, raise the profile of the Rockford region and overcome negative perceptions for the benefit of tourism development, workforce development and relocation efforts.
- Proactively tell the region's story through aggressive public relations efforts.
- Attend national events with public and private partners to establish relationships with private developers for new infrastructure such as hotels, public event venues, attractions, retail centers (e.g., P3C conference, ICSC + CenterBuild, Coliseum Global Sports Venue Alliance, Sports Venue Forum).

FUNDING

- Ensure marketing initiatives are sufficiently funded to promote and enhance visitation to the region.
- Advocate to State of Illinois for ongoing funding for tourism product development, marketing and industry workforce training programs.
- Identify and advocate for funding needed to support existing and future tourism assets development, operations and maintenance.
- Ensure funding of initiatives in this plan; and consider public-private partnerships, Tourism Improvement Districts, grant programs and other models.

LEADERSHIP

- Continually evaluate the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau role as a convenor, facilitator and leader of the plan's successful implementation.
- Ensure adequate and appropriate levels of funding for the destination marketing, management and leadership role entrusted to the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau.
- Review THRIVE 2035's recommendations and determine needed adjustments to RACVB organizational priorities, policies and operations.



GUIDING PRINCIPLES

GoRockford, the Belvidere Chamber of Commerce and the many diverse community partners involved in producing THRIVE 2035 set the tone for engagement by embracing four guiding principles for the master planning process: **Thinking Big, Equity, Inclusion and Community.**

Going forward, these principles will provide direction for community engagement and serve as a guiding light for implementation.

THINKING BIG:

Crafting bold ideas for what's possible when we come together for the greater good.

EQUITY:

Applying a lens of equity to all elements of this plan and ensuring distribution of the benefits of tourism to people and neighborhoods throughout Rockford and the region.

INCLUSION:

Collaborating in a way that recognizes, respects and values all residents, stakeholders, groups and regional partners.

COMMUNITY:

Ensuring the plan's implementation engages and supports our people and neighborhoods and promotes unity and belonging.

OVERARCHING OPPORTUNITIES

Three overarching opportunities provided clear direction for everyone involved in developing the THRIVE 2035 Destination Master Plan. **Together, they identify the most significant opportunities** for benefiting the broadest spectrum of residents and attracting visitors.

These three overarching opportunity themes will inspire decision-makers and place-makers over the next 10 years:

1

Develop and activate the Rock River and its tributaries as catalysts for regional recreation, inclusion, unification and attraction of people, business and investment.

2

Prioritize outdoor recreation infrastructure development and maintenance to connect urban, suburban and rural neighborhoods and communities.

3

Invest in central Rockford as the hub for regional vibrancy, activity and growth.



CAPITALIZING ON OUR MOMENTUM

The possibilities for Rockford's regional visitor economy are underscored by the following overarching forces that emerged during the development of this plan.

These forces are evidence of our region's positive momentum and capture the widespread agreement that this plan is not just about increasing economic gains. It's also about enriching the social fabric of the region and fostering a vibrant, inclusive community for generations to come.

These **four forces** are important to embrace, ensuring stakeholders appreciate the inherent momentum, and the opportunities to capitalize on it.


4 FORCES

- 1** The increasing satisfaction among residents with their quality of life and the City of Rockford's positive trajectory indicates a fertile ground for further enhancement.
- 2** The endorsement of Rockford and the region as a leisure destination by young, urban travelers from diverse backgrounds highlights its untapped potential, particularly in amateur sports, outdoor recreation and in support of businesses owned by people from underrepresented communities. To fully leverage this potential, greater collaboration and funding is essential.
- 3** The richness of the region's cultural assets, including arts and heritage, that align with the preferences of locals and visitors and improves the vitality of our downtowns and Main Streets.
- 4** The recognition of the crucial importance of strong neighborhoods, public parks, outdoor recreation, and robust infrastructure that includes transportation and mobility enhancements and the role these improvements play in sustaining visitor appeal and the quality of life for residents.



DESTINATION VISION

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After months of meticulous assessments, research and invaluable input from stakeholders and residents, the Steering Committee crafted this shared vision for Rockford, Belvidere and Winnebago and Boone counties. It is designed to guide and inspire the strategic direction of this 10-year Destination Master Plan.

The purpose of defining a long-term vision is to imprint an image of what is possible. That mental picture must be realistic to ensure buy-in. At the same time, it also must stretch the imagination to highlight what will be possible when local leaders and residents rally around the plan's strategic framework and work together on its implementation. Ultimately, the destination vision is designed to motivate and encourage people to contribute to making the vision real.

Our vision was designed to impart:

1. **Inspiration.**

A vision that the community is motivated to achieve.

2. **Aspiration.**

A vision that reflects bold possibilities for our future.

3. **Continuity.**

A vision that builds on the key priorities, progress and values of our region.

A few key elements emerged during the development of the vision, which included input from tourism leaders, government officials and a wide range of residents during focus groups and town halls. Our **river system** was identified as a central element to help connect and unite the entire region. Rockford's four-decade strong reputation as a **sports destination** positions the region to compete on a national level. As well, there was strong support for elevating the blending of **urban and outdoor experiences**, because that combination is both a competitive advantage for the area and at the heart of the region's culture and economy.

STRATEGIC GOALS & INITIATIVES

The strategic framework for THRIVE 2035 consists of five high-level strategic goals with complementary, actionable initiatives for achieving those goals.

These goals and initiatives were crafted under the guidance of GoRockford and the Master Plan Steering Committee, ensuring they effectively capitalize on the region's unique opportunities and help mitigate regional challenges. The five strategic goals are interrelated and designed to be addressed both individually, from a tactical economic development lens, and holistically from a quality-of-life perspective.

- 1 INVEST IN TOURISM PRODUCT**
- 2 CREATE COMPELLING EXPERIENCES**
- 3 CREATE COOL, VIBRANT SPACES & NEIGHBORHOODS**
- 4 ENHANCE CONNECTIVITY & MOBILITY**
- 5 DEVELOP OUR WORKFORCE & ATTRACT NEW TALENT**



INVEST IN TOURISM PRODUCT

Investing in tourism products — especially relating to outdoor recreation, youth sports, hotels and event venues and attractions — is imperative to activate and bridge urban and rural environments toward growth and longevity of the regional tourism economy.

For example, developing an outdoor adventure complex along the Rock River and expanding river and water recreation options will attract kayaking, boarding and boating enthusiasts who previously would not have considered Rockford for a weekend getaway. Moreover, implementing ideas like the Keith Creek Greenway plan will enhance bike mobility and connect public parks, fostering community cohesion and promoting healthy lifestyles. Expanding and connecting greenways, trails and waterways will improve accessibility for residents while boosting visits from outdoor enthusiasts. Investing in outdoor recreation for all seasons will broaden the range of experiences available to visitors in the off-season, positioning the region as a consistent destination for outdoor activities. This strategy is particularly promising as milder winter weather makes these activities more accessible and attractive.

Focusing on sports tournament infrastructure, such as utilizing the region's rivers for recreational and competitive events and enhancing existing venues, will optimize the Rockford region's reputation as a premier destination for sporting events and tournaments on a national level. Also, developing ancillary support amenities adjacent to Mercyhealth Sportscore Two — relating to entertainment, recreation, restaurants, retail and family-friendly accommodations that cater to multi-generation visitors — encourages higher spending, repeat visitation and longer stays. These amenities will reverse trends toward shorter stays, elevate and expand the visitor experience, and will make the facility and destination even more competitive nationally.

Likewise, the development of creative hotel products, meeting and event spaces, and attractions is imperative to increase weekday and off-season visitation. Creating an extensive network of purpose-built single-track mountain bike trails, investing in attractions like the International Women's Baseball Center and upgrading existing museums, gardens, theaters and historic treasures enhances the region's appeal and marketability.

INITIATIVES

OUTDOOR RECREATION

- Develop an outdoor adventure complex on the Rock River south of Davis Park.
- Expand river and water recreation options (e.g., paddle center in downtown Belvidere, additional river access sites for kayaks, standup paddleboards, etc.)
- Implement the Keith Creek Greenway plan to increase bike mobility through the heart of central Rockford and connect public parks (e.g., Aldeen Park, Alpine Park, Alpine Hills Adventure Park, Dahlquist Park and Churchill Park).
- Expand and connect the collection of trails, paths and greenways radiating out of downtown Rockford and connecting to area neighborhoods, parks, communities and regions.
- Advance the growth of outdoor adventure tour operators and outfitters near rivers and trail systems.
- Ensure that outdoor recreation infrastructure will serve the region year-round (multi-use, multi-seasons, etc.).
- Build on the early success of the Atwood Park Trail System by increasing distance, number and diversity of trails; connect and expand into other public lands along the Kishwaukee River corridor.



SPORTS TOURNAMENT INFRASTRUCTURE

- a. Evaluate the viability of developing and operating a competition-level indoor aquatics facility.
- b. Utilize the region's rivers for recreational and competitive events, elevating the region's reputation for outdoor recreation.
- c. Enhance Mercyhealth Sportscore One by improving soccer fields and softball diamonds.
- d. Enhance and expand Mercyhealth Sportscore Two by increasing the number of turf fields.
- e. Attract more regional and national-level tournaments to increase overnight visitation.
- f. Encourage development of ancillary support amenities adjacent to Mercyhealth Sportscore Two (e.g., entertainment, recreation, restaurants, retail, hotels, as well as connectivity via path and trail systems).
- g. Undertake an analysis to develop a more collaborative approach to use, access and operational efficiencies for Mercyhealth Sportscore One, Mercyhealth Sportscore Two and UW Health Sports Factory.
- h. Develop a regional sports tourism facility master plan.
- i. Convene a facility advisory committee to increase communication, insight and collaboration between regional user groups and facility operators.

HOTEL & MEETINGS DEVELOPMENT

- a. Develop a cluster of boutique hotels and meeting spaces to support assets in downtown Rockford and Belvidere.
- b. Determine demand, ideal location and support for expanded or new conference, convention and exhibition venues.
- c. Utilizing existing facilities, develop a new approach to market “unconventional” conventions and meetings facility options to spur weekday and off-season overnight visitation.
- d. Promote Rockford as an emerging meetings and conference destination.

ATTRACTIONS

- a. Support and encourage the development of the International Women's Baseball Center and celebrate the history of the Rockford Peaches.
- b. Explore the possibility of attracting a major amusement park company to build a children's theme park/adventure center.
- c. Explore feasibility for redevelopment of Rockford's National Guard Armory and surrounding neighborhood to seamlessly connect downtown and the museum campus.
- d. Encourage redevelopment of the Midway and Times theaters to combine with the Coronado Performing Arts Center to create a celebrated theater collection that can be leveraged for both the historical value and as venues for live entertainment, film festivals and performing arts competitions.



CREATE COMPELLING EXPERIENCES

Experiential travel that allows visitors to delve deeper into authentic, local encounters is on the rise and creates exciting opportunities for the region. Events and festivals are typically powerful demand generators and platforms to attract visitors to slower hotel-stay periods while day-to-day lifestyle experiences can be heightened with developments in agritourism, dining and shopping.

Events and festivals attract visitors, support small businesses and inject vitality into local communities. By drawing people from near and far, live events bring a surge of visitors into communities, supporting local hotels, restaurants, shops, attractions and transportation services. The development of multi-day festivals and events not only allow for long stays in destination but allow visitors to experience local nightlife offerings. Additionally, they create a ripple effect, sparking ancillary spending by encouraging visitors to explore more of the area. Live events can also enrich the cultural fabric of Rockford and surrounding communities to help diversify destination development and community-building efforts.

The establishment of a regional events consortium would foster collaboration and idea sharing among stakeholders to expand existing events and develop new ones. This collaboration will bring together diverse community segments and interests. It will address gaps in the current event landscape, and it will streamline processes to capitalize on shared resources. By working together, members of the consortium can prevent duplication of efforts and programming to maximize the impact of their collective initiatives.

Signature events such as river festivals, cycling events, and arts competitions draw in visitors while enhancing a community's cultural vibrancy. Moreover, the continuous enhancement of spaces like Rockford's Davis Park ensures year-round engagement for residents and visitors alike. To enrich the experience, it's also important to embrace diversity and introduce more ethnic and cultural festivals celebrating the region's rich tapestry of people and traditions.

In rural Winnebago and Boone counties, collaboration with community groups to develop agritourism strategies will highlight the area's diverse agricultural heritage and further support various local economies. Also, developing unique rural experiences, ranging from glamping to on-site farm-to-table dining, will enhance the allure of the region for more visitor segments.

Lastly, there are many communities in the two-county region that will benefit from upgrading their local shopping and dining scenes to increase main street and downtown vibrancy and economic activity. This plan recommends repurposing existing buildings into mixed-use developments and increasing support for restaurant and retail entrepreneurs.



INITIATIVES

EVENTS & FESTIVALS

- Create a regional events consortium to encourage collaboration, idea sharing, advocacy for funding, creation of events that fill gaps in event types, etc.
- Attract or develop multi-day signature events (e.g., river events, cycling, winter lights festivals, large outdoor music festivals, arts competitions).
- Continue to enhance and expand Rockford's Davis Park and nearby riverfront spaces as a year-round gathering place and event space for residents and visitors.
- Create more ethnic and cultural festivals, exhibits and businesses featuring and celebrating the region's diversity of people and cultures.
- Ensure support for funding and scalability of events.

RURAL EXPERIENCES

- Collaborate with partners and community groups in rural Winnebago and Boone counties to develop an agritourism strategy that supports local downtowns/Main Streets (e.g., wine/cider tasting, farmers markets).
- Develop camping and glamping experiences to provide additional lodging options.
- Encourage and support cultural development to promote vibrancy in our rural communities, including Pec Playhouse Theatre in Pecatonica and Apollo Theatre in Belvidere.

SHOPPING & DINING

- Rehabilitate existing buildings into compelling mixed-use developments with dynamic dining, entertainment and shopping.
- Foster opportunities for the local maker community to showcase and market their products.
- Foster the creation of and support for more local and niche shopping in downtown Belvidere, Rockton, Roscoe, Winnebago, Pecatonica, Durand, South Beloit, Cherry Valley and Rockford.



CREATE COOL, VIBRANT SPACES & NEIGHBORHOODS

The two-county region is unique in that its “downtowns” include several urban centers in Rockford – for example, the North End, Midtown District, and the River District – Belvidere, and vibrant rural main streets in Rockton, Pecatonica, and Durand. Focused support in elevating these areas as “cool, vibrant spaces” will create momentum in spurring additional development and activation while creating multiple reasons for visitors to explore an area.

Focusing on Rockford, by establishing a Downtown Business Improvement District, leaders can develop a thriving urban environment with vibrant streetscapes, lively events and a diverse mix of businesses to further establish Downtown Rockford as the region’s living and rec rooms.

To invigorate downtown areas, local stakeholders identified the need for more support for small businesses and piloting programs that provide seed funding and space options. Some tactics include enhancing amenities such as lighting programs, outdoor music, public Wi-Fi, and sidewalk dining options to create inviting spaces that attract both visitors and residents alike. Also, developing downtown ambassador programs can ensure a welcoming atmosphere, improve cleanliness and address safety concerns, enhancing the overall brand image of various regional Main Street communities.

Riverfront development is core to many of the strategies in this plan because the river system is a conduit connecting communities and providing many social and economic benefits. All the region’s river communities are ripe for further transformational development and activation such as new infrastructure, events, beautification and greenscaping.

To further enhance downtown and neighborhood vibrancy, planners recognized the effectiveness of continuing the already-strong collaboration between GoRockford and the Rockford Area Arts Council. Ideas include spotlighting neighborhood success stories, promoting local arts and culture, and advocating for public art initiatives to create unique and memorable experiences celebrating local heritage and identity.

Developing cool, vibrant spaces and neighborhoods is not just about aesthetics. It’s a strategic investment in the region’s small businesses and the identifiable uniqueness of each community.

INITIATIVES

OUR REGION’S DOWNTOWNS AND MAIN STREETS

- Establish Downtown Business Improvement Districts and support leadership to expand downtown assets and vitality (e.g., event development, beautification, business support, rooftop activations and real estate development).
- Collaborate with organizations such as Think Big! to pilot programs that support small businesses (e.g., training, seed funding and space options) and work to streamline development processes and permitting.
- Enhance lighting programs, outdoor music/ambient sound, public Wi-Fi, live music in parks, more sidewalk/roadway dining options, road closures for markets, pop-up activations and demonstration sports events to support evening and nightlife.
- Develop a downtown Rockford ambassador program to create a welcoming atmosphere and address brand image, safety and social challenges.



OUR REGION'S DOWNTOWNS AND MAIN STREETS (CONTINUED)

- e. Encourage and support development of all Main Street communities to enhance regional dining, retail, event, and nightlife experiences, especially those with established momentum such as Belvidere and Rockton.
- f. Undertake a comprehensive analysis of and create a new master plan for Downtown Rockford, including placemaking, retail, residential, entertainment, transportation and marketing.

RIVERFRONT DEVELOPMENT & ACTIVATION

- a. Encourage all river towns in the region (Rockford, Rockton, Roscoe, South Beloit, Belvidere, Cherry Valley and Pecatonica) to develop plans for leveraging their waterfront potential and creating greater access for recreational use.
- b. Incentivize businesses that incorporate public green spaces into riverfront development for leisure, farmers markets, pop-ups and other activations.
- c. Activate riverfront entertainment, shopping and dining nodes with permanent and pop-up businesses, events and festivals.

NEIGHBORHOODS

- a. Spotlight success stories of our people, history and heritage. Enhance those stories through art, storytelling and place making.
- b. Encourage additional food, maker and artisan markets (indoor and outdoor/ year-round).
- c. Enhance trail links from downtown city centers – especially Rockford and Belvidere – to connect the two counties' towns and neighborhoods and encourage the flow of pedestrian and cycling traffic.
- d. Encourage the implementation of and support the City of Rockford as the lead implementation agency for Keith Creek Corridor redevelopment, including housing, mixed-use development, trail and greenway connectivity and Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) efforts.

ARTS & CULTURE

- a. Coordinate and ideate with Rockford Area Arts Council and Boone County Arts Council, using both this Destination Master Plan and the Rockford Regional Cultural Plan to identify potential collaborations.
- b. In conjunction with Rockford Area Arts Council, and consistent with Rockford Regional Cultural Plan recommendations, develop and implement a region wide public art plan with emphasis on gateways and neighborhoods.
- c. Leverage Belvidere's reputation as the City of Murals and its art installations to further promote visitation, while also seeking opportunities to elevate the combined strength of murals throughout Boone and Winnebago counties.
- d. Advocate for public and private financial support for the arts and culture sector.
- e. Develop themed public art exhibitions and installations (e.g., sculpture and 3D lighting exhibitions) to promote overall vibrancy, distinguish neighborhoods and rural communities, encourage year-round activities and establish a sense of place.
- f. Celebrate local celebrities and notable people and groups with permanent and temporary art and exhibitions in public spaces.
- g. Work collaboratively with the Illinois Film Office to leverage the region's urban/rural proximity to identify ways to support and grow film and television production.



ENHANCE CONNECTIVITY & MOBILITY

Enhancing connectivity and mobility in the Rockford region is fundamental to fostering a thriving urban/rural ecosystem, which ensures more seamless experiences for visitors and augments and diversifies visitor spending.

By crafting comprehensive amenity and service plans for transit hubs, such as airports and train stations, local leaders can lay the groundwork for a welcoming and convenient journey. That also further develops the Rockford area as a hub-and-spoke network for regional exploration, offering more convenient and comfortable access to neighboring communities and attractions.

Prioritization and investment dedicated toward increasing passenger air service options at Chicago Rockford International Airport will have direct and immediate benefits for businesses of all sizes. Likewise, expanding and enhancing trail connectivity to parks, neighborhoods, and attractions establishes central Rockford as a main hub for visitors.

Initiatives like a region wide e-bike rental system and installation of electric vehicle charging stations further promote sustainable and accessible transportation options. Supporting Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) around future train stations in Rockford and Belvidere, coupled with promotional campaigns, will encourage visitation and boost economic activity.

To support new transportation investments, improving and expanding wayfinding, walkability and accessibility initiatives will ensure visitors of all abilities can navigate the region with ease and enjoyment. Ultimately, strategic investments in connectivity and mobility enhance the visitor experience and position Rockford as a destination that's accessible, welcoming and interconnected.

INITIATIVES

REGIONAL INTEGRATION & TRANSPORTATION

- a. Create a positive sense of destination arrival by implementing comprehensive amenity and service plans for transit hubs (e.g., airport, train and bus terminals), inclusive of recommendations outlined in the R1 mobility hub study.
- b. Encourage and support the expansion of passenger air service options at Chicago Rockford International Airport.
- c. Seek opportunities to leverage the uniqueness of Poplar Grove Airport in attracting aviators from greater Chicago and southern Wisconsin.
- d. Expand and enhance trail connectivity to parks, neighborhoods, attractions and communities north to Wisconsin, west to Galena and points east – in alignment with R1's Greenways Plan – to establish Rockford and Belvidere as a hub-spoke for visitors.
- e. Pursue development of a region wide e-bike rental system.
- f. Encourage installation of electric vehicle charging stations at hotels, attractions, venues and downtown areas in concert with the recommendations of the R1 Electric Vehicle Readiness Plan for Northern Illinois.



INTERCITY PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE

- a. Encourage development and support Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) around future Rockford and Belvidere train stations, including visitor services, workforce housing, visitor accommodations, retail and restaurants.
- b. Develop packaging and campaigns encouraging visitation to Rockford and Belvidere from Chicago and other destinations.
- c. Ensure experiential transportation options from train stations to key points of interest (e.g., Hard Rock Casino, riverfront sites and Anderson Japanese Gardens).
- d. Promote and support Metra-operated passenger rail service between Chicago and Rockford for use by inbound visitors.

WAYFINDING, WALKABILITY & ACCESSIBILITY

- a. Develop welcoming gateway and district/neighborhood signage, maps, banners and pageantry in partnership with arts groups and consistent with Rockford Region Cultural Plan recommendations.
- b. Encourage the continued installation of bike lanes and trails for recreational and commuting purposes; enhance with wayfinding, signage, maps, beautification and art.
- c. Conduct a destination wide accessibility assessment to consider the needs of people with disabilities, neurodivergent individuals and older adults.



DEVELOP OUR WORKFORCE & ATTRACT NEW TALENT

Building a stronger, more resilient workforce and pipeline of new resident workers requires a multifaceted approach with engagement from civic, business and nonprofit leaders. Workforce attraction and development is a complex, competitive issue that requires focus on transportation, housing, training and amenities that make our region an affordable, welcoming and attractive place to live, work and play.

Providing efficient and comprehensive transportation options will ensure employees are able to access work opportunities throughout the two-county region. Focusing on Transit-Oriented Developments (TODs) near employment hubs will ensure workers have convenient access to grocery stores, childcare centers and housing.

Housing inventory remains a significant challenge in many communities and the Rockford area, cited by The Wall Street Journal in April 2024 as the top housing market in the country, is no exception. Leaders from several sectors of the community are working to address the issue and once we gain momentum, we will remove a critical barrier to workforce attraction.

Nonetheless, businesses have an immediate need for attracting new workers to the area. Therefore, continued collaboration and investment in the Made for Rockford talent attraction initiative is vital. Now in its second phase, the initiative actively promotes the region's quality of life offerings and supports the recruitment efforts of area employers and recruiters.

Both new residents and visitors seek the same type of amenities in choosing destinations. Another strategy for attracting and keeping talent across all socioeconomic segments is investing in lifestyle amenities such as nightlife, entertainment, sports, and food and beverage experiences. At the same time, elevating the quality of these experiences requires continual investment in hospitality training programs.

INITIATIVES

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

- Collaborate with industry partners to support timely and reliable transportation to employment hubs.
- Advocate for workforce childcare centers at or near employment hubs, and as part of Transit-Oriented Developments (TODs).
- Advocate for workforce housing as part of new accommodation and commercial real estate developments.
- Encourage the development of a culinary and hospitality training school for post-secondary credentialing, certificates and degrees.
- Invest in amenities to attract and retain residents to the region (e.g., nightlife, entertainment, restaurants and retail).
- Leverage and promote the region's quality of life offerings, such as affordability, abundant outdoor recreation, and proximity to major travel centers, to attract new residents and workers.

LEADERSHIP

- Continue investment in Made for Rockford talent attraction initiative as led by GoRockford and in cooperation with the City of Rockford and area employers.
- Create "on ramps" for community leadership participation by convening civic and government leaders throughout Boone and Winnebago counties to share data, ideas, strategies and progress of Destination Master Plan initiatives to generate momentum and collaboration for implementation.



THRIVE 2035

BOONE COUNTY

HIGHLIGHTS

Many elements of this Destination Master Plan support tourism and quality of life development in our two-county region. As the eastern gateway to the region, Boone County and Belvidere offer ample opportunity to drive tourism and the visitor economy. From Belvidere's reputation as the City of Murals, to the Boone County Conservation District's Long Prairie Trail, to riverfront development along the Kishwaukee and the renowned Boone County Fair, the eastern side of our region is filled with a unique blend of metropolitan style and rural charm.

The highlights below capture the ideas specific to Boone County that support the plan's five strategic goals.

INVEST IN TOURISM PRODUCT

- Expand river and water recreation options (e.g., paddle center in downtown Belvidere, additional river access sites for kayaks, standup paddleboards, etc.).
- Advance the growth of outdoor adventure tour operators and outfitters to support Kishwaukee River and Boone County path systems.
- Build on the early success of the Atwood Park Trail System by increasing distance, number and diversity of trails; connect and expand into other public lands along the Kishwaukee River corridor.
- Evaluate the viability of developing and operating a competition-level aquatics facility, especially considering sites in Boone County to fill the gap created from having recently decommissioned Belvidere's outdoor public pool.



CREATE COMPELLING EXPERIENCES

- Attract or develop signature events (e.g., river events, cycling, winter lights festivals, large outdoor music festivals, arts competitions).
- Create more ethnic and cultural festivals, exhibits and businesses featuring and celebrating the region's diversity of people and cultures.
- Collaborate with partners and community groups to develop an agritourism strategy that supports rural Main Streets and downtowns, while also considering opportunities to develop a Winnebago/Boone two-county approach to agritourism.

CREATE COOL, VIBRANT SPACES AND NEIGHBORHOODS

- Rehabilitate existing buildings, such as Leath Building and OSF Saint Joseph Hospital, into compelling mixed-use developments with dynamic culinary offerings, entertainment and shopping.
- Foster the creation of and support for more local and niche shopping and dining.
- Develop a cluster of boutique hotels and meeting spaces to support downtown Belvidere assets.
- Support and promote cultural events that drive downtown vibrancy, such as live music at the Apollo Theatre.
- Incentivize businesses that incorporate public green spaces into Kishwaukee riverfront development for leisure, farmers markets, pop-ups and other activations.
- Activate Kishwaukee riverfront entertainment, shopping and dining nodes with permanent and pop-up businesses, events and festivals.
- Enhance trail links from downtown city centers – especially Rockford and Belvidere – to connect the two counties' towns and neighborhoods and encourage the flow of pedestrian and cycling traffic.
- Leverage Belvidere's reputation as the City of Murals and its art installations to further promote visitation, while also seeking opportunities to elevate the combined strength of murals throughout Boone and Winnebago counties.



ENHANCE CONNECTIVITY AND MOBILITY

- Seek opportunities to leverage the uniqueness of Poplar Grove Airport in attracting aviators from greater Chicago and southern Wisconsin.
- Expand and enhance trail connectivity to parks, neighborhoods, attractions and communities to Wisconsin and points east to establish Belvidere as a hub-spoke for visitors.
- Support development of a region wide e-bike rental system.

DEVELOP OUR WORKFORCE AND ATTRACT NEW TALENT

- Leverage and promote the region's quality of life offerings, such as affordability, abundant outdoor recreation, and proximity to major travel centers, to attract new residents and workers.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

A PLAN IS ONLY AS EFFECTIVE AS ITS EXECUTION.

The THRIVE 2035 Destination Master Plan is a road map that captures and prioritizes the collective aspirations for community and industry stakeholders for the next 10 years. However, executing the actionable initiatives outlined in the plan is a complex undertaking that will require intentional collaboration among the public, private and civic sectors.

Implementing this long-term Destination Master Plan will require ambitious, thoughtful and collaborative-minded people across all sectors to champion and lead specific initiatives proposed in the plan. The realization of these ideas needs leaders who are passionate about the future, and who will drive investment and ongoing attention to optimizing the visitor economy and quality of life for residents.

Continued Steering Committee engagement on Destination Master Plan priorities, plus the efforts of effective working groups to help move master plan strategies forward, will ensure an ongoing focus on plan implementation.

To achieve shared success, the project team will develop implementation work plans to help guide the execution of all the various action items in this document. Work plans are basically flowcharts that include the main strategic goals and all their respective initiatives. Those work plans are designed to be updated on a regular basis to define the specific initiatives that should be prioritized in the near term and the coalition of organizations responsible for their implementation. The work plans will also track accomplishments to ensure accountability and maintain momentum.

The initiatives in this plan will require funding to implement. Adequate and timely availability of financial and organizational resources is imperative to achieve the full potential of this plan. Options for funding of these community initiatives may include, but are not limited to, grants, a tourism marketing district, philanthropic donations, state and local government support, private investment and public/private partnerships.

As the implementation of this plan is pursued, a Future Needs Assessment should be undertaken to identify funding opportunities, technology needs, and the infrastructure required to fully implement the plan.

The overall implementation strategy will highlight short, medium or long-term time frames for each initiative, their intended outcomes, and any relevant key performance indicators. That chronological structure is key for identifying where there are the greatest opportunities in the short-term with the highest ROI requiring the fewest resources. As well, it will also define the timeframes and coalition building required for longer-term, more complex and more capital-intensive initiatives.

By providing a living and transparent document that remains relevant on a day-to-day basis, the implementation work plans ensure that THRIVE 2035 remains agile and can evolve with ongoing developments in the Rockford region and overall tourism marketplace.





GOROCKFORD'S ROLE IN IMPLEMENTATION

To ensure positive momentum of this plan, GoRockford, as the champion for Rockford and Winnebago County, and the Belvidere Chamber, as champion for Belvidere and Boone County, will continue to shepherd the plan through implementation. They will bring together community leaders and stakeholder groups with the desire and ability to lead and get things done. All regional businesses, governments, community organizations, groups and individual residents are invited to get involved in advancing the recommendations of this plan, ensuring the Rockford region achieves its long-term vision.

Each strategic goal in this plan is supported by subsequent initiatives that, to be successful, will require collaboration and collective support from the tourism industry, multiple partners, stakeholders and organizations across Winnebago and Boone counties.

When successfully implemented, these goals and subsequent initiatives will make a positive impact on the quality of life, quality of experience and quality of the economy in the Rockford region.

GoRockford and the Belvidere Chamber do not own the assets and experiences related to the local visitor economy, and therefore, they cannot single-handedly advance the strategies and initiatives of this plan. Their roles in implementing the Destination Master Plan will be different for each initiative and will be articulated in a corresponding implementation work plan to help guide this work.

Their roles will include one of the following:

LEAD

GoRockford takes the lead as the organization to advance initiatives.

INFLUENCE

GoRockford advocates for strategic initiatives that will advance the Rockford region for the benefit of visitors and residents.

MONITOR

GoRockford will be the support to other organizations that are leading the advancement of initiatives and will track progress against the plan.

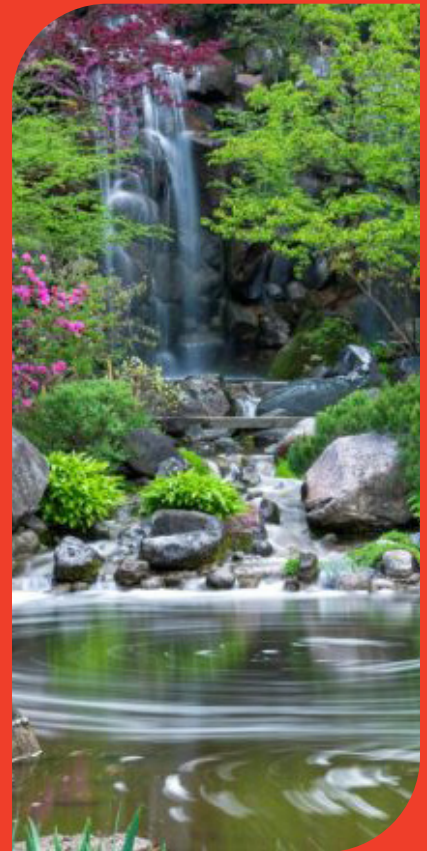


ROCKFORD MARKET ANALYSIS

To develop THRIVE 2035, GoRockford engaged a multi disciplinary consultant team led by MMGY NextFactor. The overarching goal was to create a Destination Master Plan that identifies and prioritizes community needs and opportunities, and to deliver a road map and vision for visitor-based economic growth and community development in the Rockford region.

MMGY NextFactor partnered with four firms — Hunden Partners, SMARInsights, C2 Recreation Consulting and Eight Fifteen Capital LLC — to provide expertise in product research and community engagement to support the development of the final plan. Concurrent with this work, GoRockford contracted with Huddle Up Group to conduct an in-depth review of the opportunities for increasing market share in sports tourism. Working with Lord Cultural Resources, Rockford Area Arts Council led the development of the Rockford Region Cultural Plan with support from GoRockford. Highlights from both are included in this analysis.

The THRIVE 2035 Destination Master Plan was developed from community wide conversations led by MMGY NextFactor, with support from the four project partners, through one-on-one interviews, focus groups, town halls and surveys of residents and tourism-facing businesses.



DESTINATION ASSESSMENT

IMPLICATIONS FOR SPORTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Hunden Partners (Hunden), including strategic partner Morgan Wortham (workforce, economic development and DEI specialist), were engaged to lead the tourism product market opportunity assessment, workforce and DEI initiatives.

The tourism product market opportunity assessment included an analysis of the sports and entertainment market in the Rockford region, which has strong youth and amateur sports facilities compared with many other suburban areas. It recommends priority projects, amenities and infrastructure that will best support the growth and competitiveness of the Rockford region's sports and entertainment market.

SPORTS & ENTERTAINMENT ANALYSIS

- **Supply.** Winnebago County has a competitive and high-quality supply of youth sports facilities, with Mercyhealth Sportscore One and Two, and UW Health Sports Factory. Mercyhealth Sportscore One and UW Health Sports Factory do not generate significant long-distance visitation and could generate more impact if the booking strategy were adjusted to focus on tournaments that generate more hotel room nights.
- Mercyhealth Sportscore Two, the Rockford region's strongest sports complex, generates excellent long-distance visitation and is in the top 10 most visited venues of its kind nationally.
- Unique sports offerings such as the new Victory Pickleball facility enhance the sports appeal of the Rockford region, both for residents and visitors alike. There are discussions to develop venues for indoor BMX, as well as river enhancements to expand kayaking and other water sports. The trail system is also an asset to grow and leverage.
- **Opportunity.** Additional outdoor facilities and/or increased flexibility of the indoor sports complex to accommodate additional sports and events could aid Mercyhealth Sportscore Two in drawing higher visitation and hotel demand in the future. Many other venues and complexes are being built or expanded across the Midwest, so protecting the competitiveness of Rockford's sports venues is critical to maintaining the impact of this key market. Simply pivoting sales and marketing of existing venues to attract more long-distance tournaments would generate more impact to local hotels, restaurants and retailers. The trail system and niche sports are also opportunities for expansion.



SPORTS TOURISM ASSESSMENT

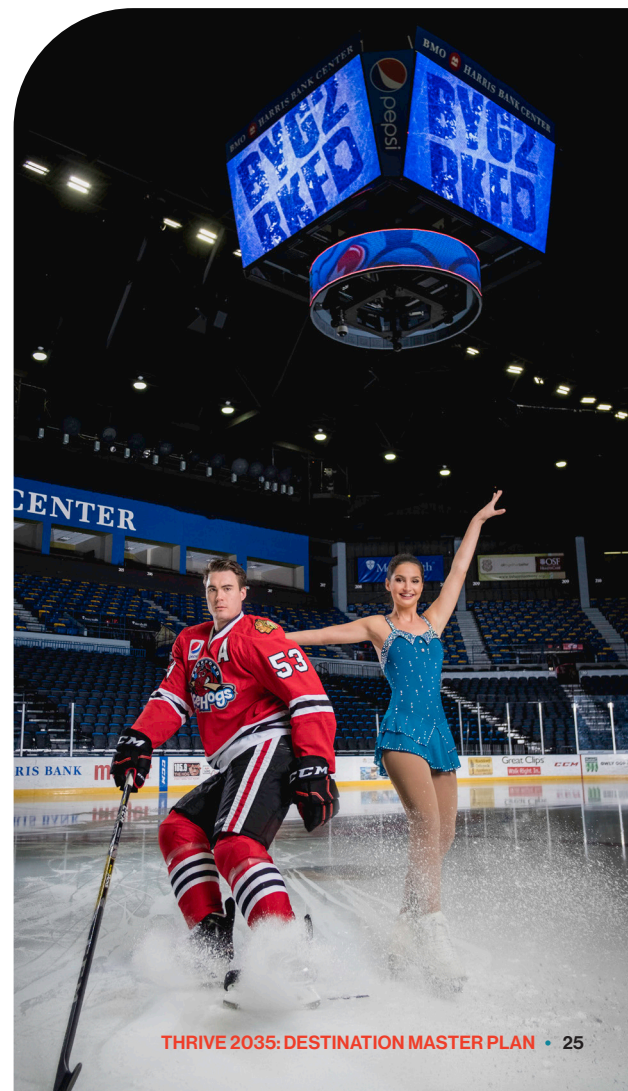
Sports tourism is one of the fastest-growing segments in the national visitor economy, and the Rockford region is well positioned to continue capitalizing on the growing demand. Destinations of all sizes are investing to expand and upgrade their sports facilities to capture more of this lucrative yet increasingly competitive market.

The Huddle Up Group conducted an in-depth review of opportunities for the Rockford region to increase its market share in sports tourism. According to their assessment: “The key moving forward will be for community stakeholders to work together in developing and maintaining tourism driving assets (sports venues) that can deliver upon the sports tourism mission of GoRockford from one year to the next.”

ROCKFORD REGION’S SPORTS TOURISM MARKET POSITION

The recommendations presented here are based upon what the consultant team believes are five universal truths about the Rockford region’s sports tourism market position:

- Sports tourism is an important market to drive economic development in the destination.
- GoRockford operates from a position of strength and has a great track record of hosting events.
- Regional and national competition is fierce.
- Facilities are key to enhancing the Rockford region’s sports tourism position (funding enhancements and new developments, while keeping the existing venues at a high standard).
- GoRockford should continue to strengthen relationships within the community.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Primary Recommendations Organizational Strategies (Shorter Term)

1. Enhance human capital
2. Update technology
3. Enhance relationships with community stakeholders

Secondary Recommendations Facility “Tool Kit” (Longer Term)

1. Improve waterway access
2. Enhance existing sports venues
3. Develop an aquatics facility
4. Develop a regional sports tourism facility master plan

Related to the Destination Master Plan, two key recommendations came out of the assessment:

The need for a sports advisory group and a regional sports tourism and facility master plan.

The purpose of a sports tourism-specific advisory group is to create an environment where the biggest sports decisions in the community happen at a GoRockford sports advisory group table. The group's makeup should include community leaders that touch sports tourism, events, economic development and the business community to connect everyone in one meaningful and intentional place.

The first priority for the sports advisory group should be the creation of a regional sports tourism facility master plan. The objective of such a plan is to inform how the Rockford region can develop events, support bids, fundraise, source grant opportunities, prioritize event opportunities, review grant requests, and/or lend political capital to GoRockford and other members of the group when needed.

Pulling together the wants and needs of all area stakeholders in a sports tourism master plan will help eliminate redundancies and lead to better regional alignment and participation from the various partners. The sports tourism master plan should also dive deeper into the hotel inventory and room block issues in the Rockford region, specifically in terms of what sports tournament organizers say they require to host their events successfully.



OUTDOOR RECREATION ASSESSMENT

C2 Recreation's driving philosophy is to connect people with the outdoors by helping them find opportunities for trail-based recreation. Their assessment of the region's existing outdoor recreational assets provided greater context for why outdoor recreation remains a top-rated experience. It also provided insights into the future development needed to maintain the region's high appeal for both residents and visitors.

The following is a summary of their findings.

EXISTING ASSETS

Existing recreation assets in the Rockford region were evaluated for the experiences they provide and for potential infrastructure expansion. Most assets need additional development to appeal to destination visitors and support increased use. Some assets, particularly the forest preserves, strongly emphasize natural resource preservation and are not intended for additional development as a regional destination.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. A solid foundation of outdoor recreation assets exists, and the facilities are geographically distributed throughout the bi-county area.
2. Existing paths and trails form a solid basis for future development that will allow people to connect neighborhoods and communities across the region.
3. Nordic and alpine skiing/snowboarding does exist but is confined to two locations.
4. The region has a robust and dispersed network of natural areas that have hiking/running trails.
5. To appeal to visitors, most of the existing assets would need to be improved and expanded.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

The Rockford region has major opportunities for destination-quality outdoor recreation that don't exist in other communities. In particular, the central Rockford area has a combination of greenways, parks, and rivers radiating out of its downtown. The parks and greenways can be developed into a network of cycling, running, and hiking paths and trails that keep downtown Rockford at the hub of outdoor recreation, support a vibrant central city and bring visitors to the area's smaller communities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Develop an aquatics adventure complex south of downtown Rockford on the Rock River.
2. Prioritize outdoor recreation development to connect urban and rural environments.
 - a. Expand "Play, Paddle, Speed" river and water recreation options (e.g., paddle center in downtown Belvidere).
 - b. Increase bike mobility through the heart of central Rockford by connecting Aldeen Park, Alpine Park, Alpine Hills Adventure Park, Searls Park, Levings Park, Rockford University, and Rock Cut State Park via a trail ecosystem that includes the Pecatonica Trail, Rock River Pathway, Mel Anderson Bike Path, and the Kent Creek and Keith Creek Greenways.
 - c. Upgrade walking trails and improve support services and amenities.
3. Provide grants and other small business support to advance the growth of outdoor adventure tour operators and outfitters in downtown Rockford, Rockton and Belvidere, near rivers, paths and trails.

DESTINATION ASSESSMENT

IMPLICATIONS FROM ADDITIONAL MARKETS

Hunden Partners' tourism product market opportunity assessment identifies the strengths of the current Rockford region marketplace and its potential for growth. It also recommends priority projects, amenities and infrastructure that will best support the growth and competitiveness of the Rockford region's tourism economy.

CONVENTION & MEETINGS MARKET

- **Supply.** Currently, Rockford does not have a dedicated traditional convention or conference center with modern and flexible exhibit, ballroom and breakout meeting rooms. The current supply of such spaces is scattered among hotel and banquet properties of various sizes, ages and quality levels. The most modern, largest event space will be Hard Rock Live, opening in the summer of 2024. The facility will include a 1,800-capacity event venue that will primarily be used for concerts, yet also available for all manner of conference and ballroom event types. Beyond this venue, the facilities in Rockford are smaller, aged or both. The other strong asset is the Embassy by Hilton Rockford Riverfront Suites downtown, which is an impressive hotel and authentic historical structure popular for smaller events. Its popularity suggests there is more opportunity for larger venues, especially if located in a compelling area with walkable or nearby amenities.
- Proximity and accessibility to the drive-in market between Milwaukee, Chicago and Madison, as well as downstate Illinois, does provide a market to pull from.
- **Opportunity.** A unique and compelling event venue to accommodate various event types is an opportunity for Rockford to investigate further. Factors to consider in such a study include size/physical program, walkable quality hotels, a headquarters hotel, location (downtown, interstate, other), adjacent complementary uses (restaurants, bars, retail, entertainment options) and funding options.

ENTERTAINMENT FACILITIES ANALYSIS

- **Local Entertainment Supply:** For the size of Rockford, the supply of entertainment venues will be enhanced with the addition of the Hard Rock Live flat floor venue development, opening late summer 2024. Rockford has three auditoriums/theaters but does not have a diverse range of entertainment offerings.
- Rockford Casino - A Hard Rock Opening Act was the region's third most visited attraction in 2022 and will attract additional visitors with the new permanent Hard Rock Casino Rockford opening in the summer of 2024. The entertainment venue at the Hard Rock will fill a gap that currently exists in the market for a flexible, medium-sized event venue that can attract top talent.
- BMO Center, the region's largest indoor sports and entertainment arena, is completing renovation projects that will enhance the facility's overall appeal, including attendee amenities. While visitation in 2022 surpassed pre-pandemic levels and visitors come from outside Rockford for events, overnight stays are modest from the venue.
- **Entertainment Opportunity:** There is minimal opportunity to build a new larger entertainment venue without cannibalizing existing demand. However, there is an opportunity to further enhance and diversify existing venues, such as Veterans Memorial Hall to offer dinner theater, options to expand outdoor concerts at Davis Park, and potential reuse of the National Guard Armory.

ROCKFORD REGION HOTEL MARKET

- **Downtown Rockford Supply:** The Embassy Suites by Hilton Rockford Riverfront is downtown Rockford's only hotel asset. It is the highest-quality hotel in the market and caters to higher-spending groups. It is also the only hotel in the downtown area, helping to anchor the future of a walkable amenity-dense district. However, without more hotels and function spaces downtown, there will continue to be lost business (unaccommodated demand), including at the BMO Center.
- **Local Supply:** Most hotel properties are within Winnebago County and clustered along I-90. However, very few properties offer function space for meetings and events, which has led to a slow return of corporate and group travel since the pandemic.
- **Opportunity:** There is opportunity to add to the Rockford region's hotel supply if there are additional demand generators that induce more visitation and room nights for the market. Downtown is a special opportunity to add hotels and other amenities that can build off the halo effect of the Embassy Suites, revitalized Davis Park and other assets. However, more restaurants, shops and entertainment options in a walkable district will be required longer term to support viability of more hotels. This lack of critical mass suggests that adding more of each asset type over time will help downtown and the visitor economy.



SHOPPING AND DINING NODES

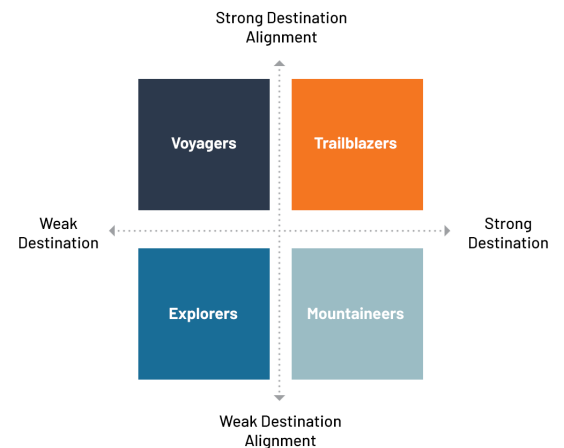
- **Local Supply:** Downtown Rockford on the east side of the river and East State Street blocks in downtown are the most urbanized and walkable and activated places in the Rockford region. River recreational activities, walking trails, museums and the nearby UW Health Sports Factory and Embassy Suites combined with food and beverage offerings create a strong sense of place in downtown Rockford. CherryVale Mall and the surrounding district generate strong annual visitation, though the mall itself generates only modest out-of-state visitation due to limited retail offerings compared with nearby malls in Chicagoland and Madison. East State Street retail and restaurants generate nearly 10 million visits annually, the most out-of-state visitation in the region.
- **Future Opportunities:** Additional unique and experiential restaurant and retail concepts that offer public gathering or event space (food halls, "eatertainment") are future additional development opportunities for the region. The area can activate the downtown riverfront and recreational activity with additional food and beverage and retail offerings. Downtown Belvidere presents a significant opportunity for growth and build-out with mixed-use developments and programmed events to generate interest and traffic.
- **Unique Offerings, Adult-Beverage Opportunities:** The Rockford City Market operates about two dozen days per year during the summer and early fall. Additional indoor food hall development and additional major events could aid in increasing tourism to the region. Utilizing existing industrial / manufacturing buildings in Rockford for mixed-use redevelopment including residential, office and unique food and beverage concepts like new distilleries and breweries is an opportunity for the city and region. Craft breweries are often established within downtown and mixed-use districts and can enhance tourist appeal.
- **Destination Appeal:** As a gateway to downtown Rockford, East State Street is what most non-locals see of the area. With that, a unique attraction(s), restaurants, and stores would help to set it apart. Outside downtown Rockford, retail and dining nodes lack a density of unique assets that help attract tourism demand. Other destinations have been very successful in creating walkable, authentic areas that combine an eclectic mix of local assets. Development of locally driven and sourced food and beverage concepts, along with family entertainment and retail, can help establish a region's destination appeal.

DESTINATIONNEXT ASSESSMENT

Developed by MMGY NextFactor, the comprehensive DestinationNEXT Assessment Tool is a global tourism industry standard designed to empirically measure how a specific destination's visitor economy is performing across a wide spectrum of indicators.

The methodology incorporates an in-depth survey of government officials, tourism leaders, community organizations, business owners and other key stakeholders. The survey questions focus on 24 different variables related to overall destination strength, including visitor industry infrastructure, experiences and services, and overall destination alignment, focusing on how well government, community and industry leaders work together.

The survey data is then plotted into a quadrant scenario model that compares the destination with more than 350 DestinationNEXT Assessments in other communities. The results provide valuable business intelligence identifying the greatest opportunities and most significant challenges for the region's visitor economy.



12 DESTINATION ALIGNMENT VARIABLES



Attractions & Experiences



Art, Culture & Heritage



Dining, Shopping & Entertainment



Outdoor Recreation



Conventions & Meetings



Events & Festivals



Sporting Events



Accommodation



Local Mobility & Access



Destination Access



Communication Infrastructure



Health & Safety

12 DESTINATION STRENGTH VARIABLES



Business Support



Community Group & Resident Support



Government Support



Organization Governance



Workforce Development



Hospitality Culture



Equity, Diversity & Inclusion



Funding Support & Certainty



Regional Cooperation



Sustainability & Resilience



Emergency Preparedness



Economic Development

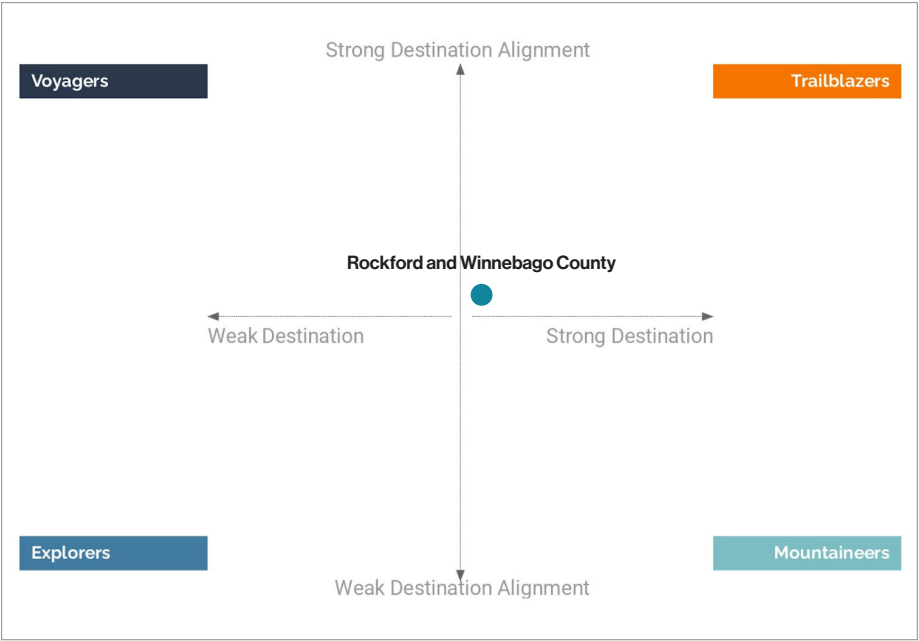
THRIVE 2035 DESTINATIONNEXT RESULTS

A total of 281 local industry and community stakeholders participated in the Rockford and Winnebago County, and Boone County DestinationNEXT surveys: 237 stakeholders participated in the Rockford and Winnebago County survey, and 44 filled out the Boone County survey.

ROCKFORD & WINNEBAGO COUNTY DESTINATIONNEXT RESULTS

Rockford and Winnebago County is in the Trailblazer quadrant. The results place the region as slightly above the industry average in terms of both destination strength and destination alignment.

Rockford and Winnebago County scores can be attributed to concerns related to perceptions of safety/ crime and local mobility factors such as reliable public transportation, walkability and wayfinding.



While stakeholders have offered positive remarks regarding leadership and governance, there’s a recognized necessity for increased collaboration and intervention. These efforts should be directed toward addressing crucial quality of life factors, including workforce development, enhancing the overall appeal of the community, and exploring strategies to invigorate the downtown, riverfront and lakefront areas.

SURVEY RESULTS

The following are the highest and lowest ranked variables in the Rockford and Winnebago County 2023 survey:

Highest ranked destination strength variables (out of 5)

Outdoor Recreation	3.99
Arts, Culture & Heritage	3.92
Sporting Events	3.91
Attractions & Experiences	3.71
Communication Infrastructure	3.68

Highest ranked destination alignment variables (out of 5)

Economic Development	4.07
Business Support	4.03
Government Support	3.97
Organization Governance	3.91
Sustainability & Resilience	3.81

Lowest ranked destination strength variables (out of 5)

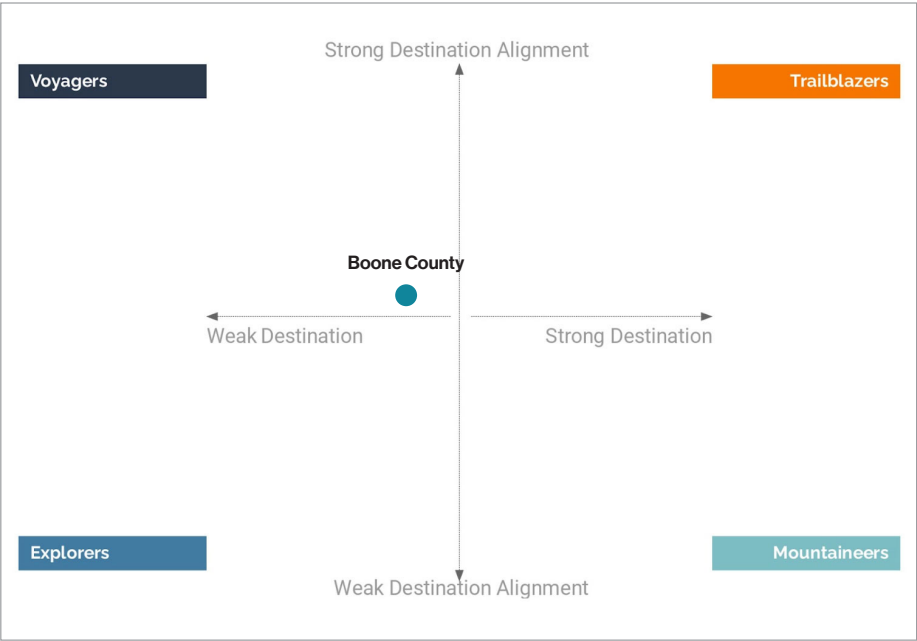
Health & Safety	2.84
Local Mobility & Access	2.95
Destination Access	3.25
Dining, Shopping & Entertainment	3.27
Accommodation	3.48

Lowest ranked destination alignment variables (out of 5)

Workforce Development	2.96
Hospitality Culture	3.41
Funding Support & Certainty	3.49
Equity, Diversity & Inclusion	3.56
Emergency Preparedness	3.69

BOONE COUNTY DESTINATIONNEXT RESULTS

Boone County is in the Voyagers quadrant with below-average scores for destination strength and above-average scores for destination alignment.



Boone County’s scores reflect challenges in attracting and retaining visitors, including a lack of accommodations, dining, shopping and entertainment options. Additionally, the area’s workforce infrastructure limitations, such as professional development, reliable transportation, and affordable housing, contribute to the decline in residents.

SURVEY RESULTS

The following are the highest and lowest-ranked variables in the Boone County 2023 survey:

Highest ranked destination strength variables (out of 5)		Highest ranked destination alignment variables (out of 5)	
Health & Safety	4.01	Sustainability & Resilience	4.18
Events & Festivals	3.56	Business Support	4.11
Communication Infrastructure	3.41	Emergency Preparedness	4.10
Arts, Culture & Heritage	3.39	Economic Development	3.94
Destination Access	3.27	Organization Governance	3.90
Lowest ranked destination strength variables (out of 5)		Lowest ranked destination alignment variables (out of 5)	
Accommodation	2.46	Funding Support & Certainty	2.90
Dining, Shopping & Entertainment	2.67	Workforce Development	3.23
Sporting Events	2.84	Regional Cooperation	3.38
Conventions & Meetings	2.87	Hospitality Culture	3.57
Attractions & Experiences	3.01	Equity, Diversity & Inclusion	3.59

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM DESTINATIONNEXT

1

Crime and safety concerns, hand-in-hand with appearance and beautification improvements, are two of the most often mentioned issues that stakeholders want addressed in Rockford. Doing so will impact visitors positively while also improving resident pride and support.

2

Improving dining, shopping and entertainment options was the third highest variable in importance to Rockford, yet scored 12th in performance with a 3.27. Incentivizing new dining and shopping experiences, and then working within these districts or areas to improve the pedestrian experience and generate awareness will be critical.

3

There is a need for effective training programs for frontline workers in both counties, although the need was expressed more urgently by Rockford and Winnebago County stakeholders. Working with an educational institution to design a robust program is desirable, but it's also important for the destination marketing organization to work with hospitality employers now on simple training modules to increase employees' knowledge and customer service delivery in order to improve the overall hospitality culture.

4

Belvidere and Boone County stakeholders seem conflicted about the area's tourism development because it's unclear how such efforts would be funded, which organizations would lead these efforts, and whether doing so is their biggest priority. Having these conversations with robust (multi-organization) participation is a critical first step.

5

Boone County and Belvidere stakeholders perceive there is a lack of tourism infrastructure and amenities in Boone County. This covers a broad scope of needs from accommodations, attractions and restaurants, to broadband access and suppliers for recreational offerings. A list of shared priorities from alignment between local and regional civic and business leaders is needed.



VISITOR PERCEPTION & BRAND POSITIONING

Strategic Marketing & Research Insights (SMARInsights) produced a Rockford 2023 Brand and Image Study for this plan that explores perceptions of Rockford within the context of competing destinations, including: Champaign, IL; Springfield, IL; Des Moines, IA; Fort Wayne, IN; and Madison, WI.

The scope of the study includes an overall visitor attitudinal review of the Rockford region relating to familiarity, destination rating, visitation and likelihood to visit. The research also identified how visitors evaluate the image of Rockford, including strengths/weaknesses and barriers to visitation, various customer segments and traveler behavior (frequency, purpose and lodging).

HIGH-LEVEL INSIGHTS GLEANED FROM THE RESEARCH:

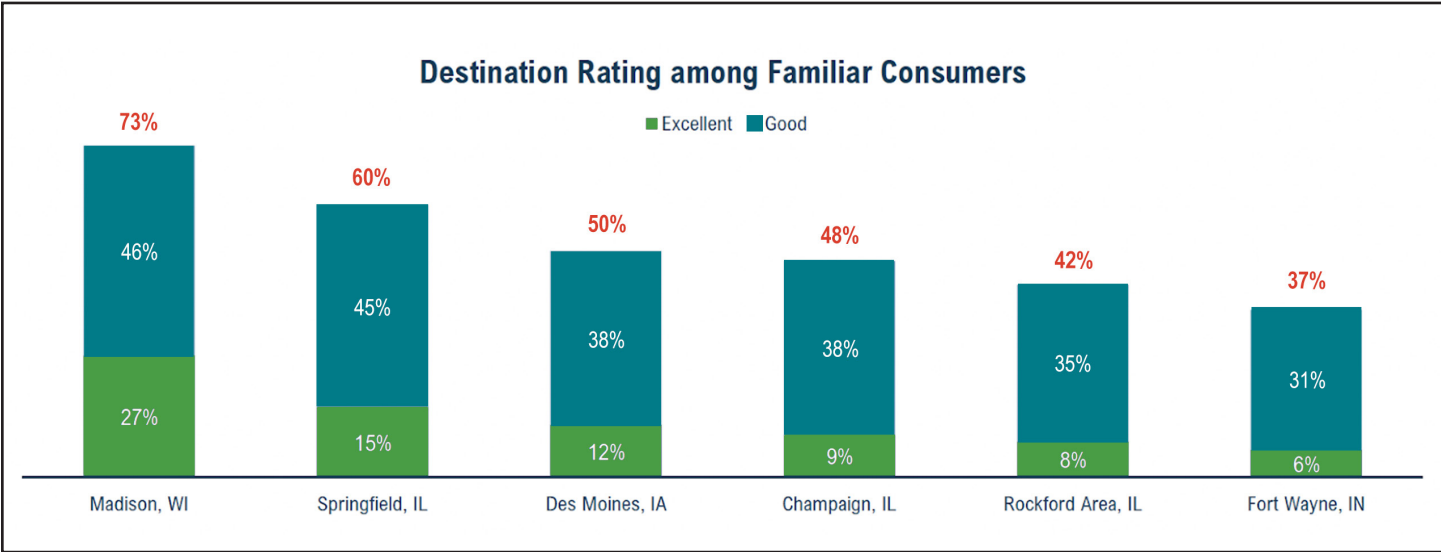
- Young, urban travelers from diverse backgrounds positively rate Rockford as a leisure getaway destination.
- A few factors aid in attracting these types of visitors: proximity to urban centers; attractions for kids including youth sports events/facilities; a strong base of businesses owned by people from underrepresented communities; and a sense of growth, fun and a welcoming nature.
- While many consumers in the target markets know of the Rockford region, the destination is one of the worst performers in destination ratings, stemming from poor perceptions of safety and awareness of things to do.
- More than half of all consumers are familiar with Rockford as a destination but only 8% consider it an excellent destination, second lowest in the comp set.
- Those who gave negative responses mentioned unfamiliarity with things to do, lack of interest, and concerns over crime and safety. Rockford received the lowest comparative rating for “safe.”
- The opportunity lies not in improving perceptions of safety, but rather boosting appeal for the downtown, nightlife, arts and cultural attractions, and the creative personality of the destination.



DESTINATION RATING RESPONSES

The following charts are a sample of the data collected from the SMARInsights survey.

The data below compares how visitors rate the six destinations in the competitive set overall. The Rockford region leans toward the low end of the spectrum, ranked between Champaign and Fort Wayne.



VISITOR COMMENTS

The following chart includes a sample of direct comments in the survey made by visitors who are familiar with the Rockford region.

Good/Excellent Ratings	Poor/Fair Ratings
<ul style="list-style-type: none">It is close to Chicago and offers plenty to do and see.Lots of great hiking trails with good food and shops along the way. Close to home too.I think that the Rockford Area, IL is an excellent leisure destination because I think that this area has a lot to do but also isn't so busy that people feel overcrowded.This area is near the quad cities.Small town atmosphere, many unique experiences, friendly people. Great river area.Everyone was very friendly	<ul style="list-style-type: none">It is close relatively but feel there is high crime.I really can't think of anything that I would want to do there. I drive past Rockford and have never really considered stopping.It has some bad areas that feel unsafe and there wasn't much to do but I was mostly visiting family, so I didn't look much into tourist activities.There's nothing really special or attraction in Rockford. The surrounding area of Rockford is pretty busy with things to do. But Rockford itself isn't a place to vacation for leisure trips.I've never heard anything about it.While there is a lot to do, it is not very safe in Rockford. It is hard to participate in leisure when you're worried about safety.

WORKFORCE ASSESSMENT

Hunden Partners prepared a comprehensive assessment of local labor trends for this plan. Employment statistics are important to understand current market conditions and how growth is expected to continue in coming years.

Based on 2023 data, the Rockford region has a civilian labor force of 161,924. Of the individuals 19 years and over in the Rockford MSA, 15.4% have a bachelor's degree or higher, which is 5.7% below the national average. There is also significant disparity in unemployment rates between the Rockford MSA and the national average, with Rockford's rate at 5.9% compared with the national rate of 3.4%, which indicates a challenging economic environment for the region. This high unemployment rate, particularly in the context of the leisure and hospitality industry, could have implications for workforce availability. A higher unemployment rate might mean a larger pool of potential employees for the leisure and hospitality sector, potentially easing hiring challenges.

Overall, Rockford MSA showed a slight 3.8% decrease in jobs from 2017 to 2022 which is expected because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The projection from 2022 onward suggests a continued positive trend, with job numbers expected to grow steadily through to 2027. This rebound and growth could be attributed to recovery efforts, economic stimulus, and possibly the adaptation of businesses to new market conditions and consumer behaviors post-pandemic.

The expected job growth between 2022 to 2027 is estimated at 1%, which will net 3,786 jobs over the 15-year period. The gradual increase in jobs indicates an improving economic situation in Rockford, with growth potentially driven by expansion in various sectors.

Rockford's leisure and hospitality workforce, like many others, is still recovering from the pandemic's impact. However, a 5% growth in employment is anticipated within the sector from 2022 to 2027. This is crucial considering accommodation, food services, arts, entertainment and recreation are all major industries that significantly impact visitor satisfaction and can be the deciding factor in repeat visitation.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE WORKFORCE ASSESSMENT

- **Employment:** The Leisure & Hospitality sector in Rockford experienced a 3.8% decline in employment from 2017 to 2022.
- **Projected Recovery:** There's an anticipated 5% growth in employment within Leisure & Hospitality from 2022 to 2027, suggesting a strong recovery and growth potential post-pandemic.
- **Industry Size and Ranking:** Within the region, Accommodation & Food Services is the fifth-largest industry, indicating a strong employment market.
- **Job Postings and Market Dynamics:** Limited-Service Restaurants lead in job postings, with a high turnover that reflects a dynamic market with frequent job openings.
- **Workforce Characteristics:** The racial and gender demographics in Leisure & Hospitality show a majority of white workers, and more females than males employed, which aligns with national industry trends.
- **Unemployment Rates:** As of December 2023, the unemployment rate was 5.9%, which is significantly higher than the national average of 3.4%. This could imply a more considerable pool of potential employees for Leisure & Hospitality, which could ease hiring challenges in the sector.
- **Skills Gap:** There is a noted skills gap, particularly in Restaurant Operation, where the demand for this skill in job postings surpasses the supply within candidate profiles. This suggests an area for targeted workforce development.
- **Educational Alignment:** There's a lower percentage of individuals with bachelor's degrees or higher in the Rockford MSA compared with the national average, which could impact the availability of a highly educated workforce for management positions within Leisure & Hospitality.
- **Commuter Patterns:** The region exhibits significant net outflows of commuters between -4,023 to -6,600 depending on the community, which suggests that a considerable number of residents commute out of their local area for work.
- **Wage Trends:** The median advertised wage in the Leisure & Hospitality sector has seen an increase of 14% over the last year. These rising wage levels could be due to increased competition for workers or a response to inflationary pressures.

ROCKFORD REGION CULTURAL PLAN ALIGNMENT

BACKGROUND

In early 2023, the Rockford Area Arts Council (RAAC), supported by partners - including the Community Foundation of Northern Illinois, GoRockford and the City of Rockford - engaged the team of Lord Cultural Resources to facilitate the development of a cultural plan for the Rockford region. Lord Cultural Resources is the global practice leader in cultural sector planning, which is steadily increasing in value for destinations.

With the assistance of a Project Advisory Committee representing a cross-section of community stakeholders, the consulting team worked for over a year to develop this plan. That work included multiple meetings with the consulting team leading the development of the Destination Master Plan, and members of GoRockford and the RAAC to ensure alignment and ongoing collaboration.

Culture and the creative industries have proven to be very powerful catalysts for equitable community and neighborhood development in cities of all sizes across North America.

The Rockford Region Cultural Plan and THRIVE 2035 prioritize developing and implementing region wide public art plans that aim to enhance vibrancy, distinguish neighborhoods and create a strong sense of place. Public and private financial support for the arts is a key focus of the plans, alongside fostering inclusivity and increasing creative opportunities for youth through arts education.



EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES

The 10 emerging opportunities from the work of the Cultural Plan are:

1. Tell Rockford's story better, highlighting Rockford's rich and diverse history
2. Provide more inclusive representation of artists and cultural offerings and welcoming environments
3. Increase creative opportunities for youth and arts education
4. Foster collaboration and connection within the cultural sector and with other sectors
5. Leverage and develop underutilized spaces for cultural uses
6. Strengthen funding/revenue mechanisms and policies for arts and culture
7. Improve advocacy and data capture around arts and culture
8. Strengthen awareness of arts and culture in Rockford
9. Foster brave conversations through arts and culture
10. Further neighborhood development with arts and culture.

CULTURAL PLAN PRIORITIES

These 10 opportunities were refined into the four priorities:

ADVOCACY & POLICY:

Invest in Rockford's cultural narrative through funding, policy, and advocacy.

INCLUSIVITY/INTERSECTIONAL COLLABORATION:

Foster more inclusive cultural representation through greater collaboration and connection throughout Rockford.

YOUTH & ARTS EDUCATION:

Increase creative opportunities for youth and arts education.

NEIGHBORHOOD & SPACE DEVELOPMENT:

Activate neighborhoods and underutilized spaces with arts and culture.



A COHESIVE APPROACH

Initiatives in both plans are designed to activate neighborhoods and underutilized spaces with arts and culture, highlighting the role of creative placemaking in community revitalization. It is paramount for urban and rural leaders to coordinate efforts in the two plans for a cohesive approach to promoting arts and culture in Rockford and the region, fostering community engagement, and enhancing the region's overall vibrancy.

REGIONAL CONTEXT

Existing plans, policies and regulations from city, county, regional, and national perspectives were used to inform GoRockford's THRIVE 2035 Destination Master Plan. The project team recognizes and respects the work that has already been done in this region and considers it a solid foundation to build upon.

- 2021-2025 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for Northern Illinois - Winnebago, Boone, McHenry Counties - Region 1 Planning Council (2020)
- 2021 Greenways: A Greenways Plan for Boone, Ogle, and Winnebago Counties - Region 1 Planning Council (2021)
- 2050 Metropolitan Transportation Plan - Region 1 Planning Council (2020)
- Competitive Analysis of Destination Marketing: Rockford, IL - Tourism Economics (2019)
- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Parks and Recreation - National Recreation and Park Association (2021)
- Downtowns Rebound: The Data Driven Path to Recovery - Center City District (2023)
- Economic Impact of Tourism in Illinois - Illinois State Office of Tourism & Tourism Economics (2022)
- Engagement with Parks Report - National Recreation and Park Association (2022)
- Infrastructure Priorities Report for the Northern Illinois Region - Region 1 Planning Council (2023)
- Keith Creek Corridor Study - Region 1 Planning Council (2022)
- Made for Rockford, IL: Regional Talent Attraction Initiative - Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau (2021)
- Mobility Hubs Study for the Rockford Region - Region 1 Planning Council (2023)
- Portrait of American Travelers, Rockford Families - MMGY Global Research and Insights (2018-2019)
- Rockford Region Cultural Plan - Lord Cultural Resources (2023, 2024)
- Rockford Regional Marketing Findings - Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, GrahamSpencer (2017)
- Survey of Winnebago County Residents - Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau, University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford (2018)
- The Economic Impact of Local Parks - National Recreation and Park Association (2022)
- The Economic Impact of the Arts Industry in Northern Illinois - Region 1 Planning Council & Rockford Area Arts Council (2021)
- The Health Benefits of Parks and their Economic Impacts - Urban Institute (2022)
- The Outdoor Recreation Economy - Outdoor Industry Association (2017)
- Workforce and Employment Information Updates - Illinois Department of Security (2020, 2023)



TOURISM & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ALIGNMENT

Region 1 Planning Council (R1), as the federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organization and Economic Development District for the Rockford region, is recognized by elected leadership in Boone and Winnebago Counties as the lead agency for regional transportation and economic development infrastructure planning and funding for implementation. The Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) and Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP), developed and maintained by R1, provide a planning framework that align with the THRIVE 2035: Destination Master Plan as well as various municipal land-use, transportation and economic development plans in Boone and Winnebago Counties. An updated five-year CEDS and MTP will be adopted in 2025.

ALIGNMENT BETWEEN DESTINATION MASTER PLAN AND THE COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

It is critical that the strategic direction of THRIVE 2035 supports relevant strategic goals in the CEDS. There are many shared priorities for the tourism industry and the public sector related to destination and tourism product development, downtown vibrancy, inclusive community building, equitable workforce housing and development, and transportation improvements.

The six strategic goals for the current CEDS (2021-2025) plan focus on the following themes:

1. Infrastructure development (transportation, utilities, communication)
2. Sustainable and equitable economic development to improve quality of life
3. Regional collaboration, communication and promotion to attract investment
4. Workforce development and business innovation, expansion and diversification
5. Downtown/community development, enhanced livability, safety, health and inclusivity
6. Tourism and outdoor recreation development

The CEDS highlights various regional entities responsible for each action item in the Tactical Plan section, including the recognition of “Tourism Bureaus” as partners in completing and implementing CEDS priorities.

SHARED PRIORITIES

However, there are opportunities for the regional tourism industry to support strategic direction and initiatives beyond what the CEDS specifically recognizes. There are several shared priorities between THRIVE 2035 and the CEDS that should be capitalized on, including:

1. Holistic regional identity, branding and marketing development for the public, private and civic sectors
2. Sustainable downtown and riverfront development, placemaking, vibrancy, etc.
3. Equitable small business development and funding support
4. Workforce attraction, development and retention
5. Support for the creative economy and culinary/ agritourism supply chain
6. Outdoor recreation infrastructure development
7. Transportation/trail development and multimodal mobility enhancements



ALIGNMENT BETWEEN DESTINATION MASTER PLAN AND THE METROPOLITAN TRANSPORTATION PLAN

The MTP is designed to ensure that the Rockford region has a balanced multi-modal transportation system that safely and efficiently moves people and goods. Transportation and mobility are crucial elements that enhance regional connectivity and promote the discovery of new destinations. Long-range planning in these areas ensures sustainable growth, reduces congestion, and fosters economic development, ultimately contributing to a thriving and well-connected community.

The five strategic goals for the 2050 Metropolitan Transportation Plan focus on the following objectives:

1. Broaden the regional scope of transportation partnerships to expand the multi-modal transportation network
2. Prioritize maintaining and future-proofing infrastructure and transportation facilities to ensure long-term system reliability and resilience
3. Adapt innovative technologies to efficiently improve freight and passenger transport
4. Data-based strategy to ensure transportation investments effectively serve the regional transportation needs
5. Enhance quality of life through sustainable and equitable integrated transportation and land use planning

SHARED PRIORITIES

The objectives of the MTP align with several priorities specified in THRIVE 2035. These shared priorities are as follows:

1. Establish multi-modal corridors and commuter connections to support the workforce
2. Enhance bike infrastructure and pedestrian access with an emphasis on safety and regional connectivity
3. Develop regional electric vehicle access plan and supporting green initiatives
4. Enhance access and usage at the Chicago Rockford International Airport
5. Secure sustainable funding sources to aid the maintenance and expansion of infrastructure





GLOBAL INDUSTRY TRENDS

The national tourism industry has seen significant shifts since the global pandemic of 2020-23. The Destinations International Futures Study 2023 identified those shifts, based on surveys with more than 800 tourism organizations. The following six major market trends are most relevant to the Rockford region:

UNEVEN RECOVERY:

Not every destination recovered as quickly or as robustly as others in the aftermath of the pandemic. While outdoor destinations fared better than others, recovery has largely been uneven.

TECHNOLOGY IMPACTS:

Technology is changing how visitors choose and book vacations; how meeting and event planners source destinations; and how destination marketing organizations, experience and accommodation providers market and engage with customers. The impacts and opportunities for AI and other digital technologies will continue to evolve.

PURPOSEFUL TRAVEL:

Travelers are increasingly seeking experiences that support personal improvement. Offering these types of experiences for different audience segments will be key to attracting new visitors.

RESILIENCY OF MEETINGS:

Amid the global pandemic and in the early stages of recovery, there was speculation that meetings and conferences would not return to the large-scale events they had been, and that virtual meetings would overtake the industry. However, delegates continue to seek the in-person experience. Meetings and conferences have been a resilient segment of the tourism industry with forecasts predicting this will continue.

OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES:

The global pandemic spurred a significant interest in outdoor experiences, and that trend is not dissipating. Visitors are still seeking opportunities to be outdoors, whether for adventure, walking and sightseeing, or dining. The trend today is to continue to innovate outdoor experiences to help differentiate them.

FIERCE COMPETITION:

Travel has returned in a significant way. Not only are Americans traveling more, but international visitation to the United States has also returned. This is driving fierce competition among destinations globally, and a critical reason to be focused on experience development and staying aligned with consumer trends.

2023 FUTURES STUDY



MMGY NextFactor in partnership with Destinations International conducted the largest global survey of tourism industry leaders ever to produce the DestinationNEXT 2023 Futures Study, with 837 tourism executives from 62 countries participating. This extensive process led to the development of 50 industry trends and 50 destination marketing organization strategies.



TRANSFORMATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Of the 50 trends identified through the extensive process of the Futures Study, the consulting team identified six global industry trends relevant to their findings throughout the course of this THRIVE 2035 project. Four transformational opportunities emerged that relate directly to Rockford's 10-Year Destination Master Plan and the future of the destination:

1. Customers are increasingly seeking a unique, authentic travel experience.
2. Communities expect to be more engaged in destination, product and experience development for locals and visitors.
3. Destinations are looking at sustainability/regeneration more broadly, encompassing economic, social, and environmental impacts.
4. Greater industry, community and government alignment is driving destination competitiveness and brand.

THRIVE 2035

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The project team engaged more than 320 community and industry stakeholders from various sectors to ensure that this plan effectively accomplishes the aspirations of Rockford's diverse communities.

The primary objective of this engagement was to pinpoint key opportunities and challenges for shaping Rockford's future as both a sought-after destination for visitors and a thriving environment for residents.



21 in-depth interviews were conducted

8 focus groups were held with industry and community groups

3 community town halls were held to seek input from residents

FOCUS GROUPS

As noted, eight focus groups were conducted with more than 100 community and industry stakeholders from the public and private sectors participating:

- Hotels
- Outdoor recreation
- Amateur sports
- Restaurants
- Arts, museums and attractions
- Festivals and events
- Winnebago and Boone County leaders
- Young professionals

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

There were 21 in-depth, one-on-one stakeholder interviews, including the mayors of Rockford and Belvidere; elected and appointed city, county (Boone and Winnebago) and state officials; and parks, arts, private sector and tourism industry leaders.

COMMUNITY TOWN HALLS

GoRockford and MMGY NextFactor organized three community town hall workshops in the Rockford region in October 2023. These workshops were held at the Riverfront Museum Park, the Radisson Hotel & Conference Center Rockford, and the Rivers Edge Recreation Center in Belvidere. Over 40 residents attended these sessions where the results of the Resident Sentiment survey were shared. The residents were actively engaged in group discussions concerning the opportunities, challenges, benefits and quality of experiences related to the developing the tourism economy and improving local quality of life.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

Following the completion of the in-depth interviews, focus groups and community town halls, the following key opportunities and challenges emerged:

KEY OPPORTUNITIES

- Outdoor recreation and sports products
- Downtown revitalization
- Neighborhood development
- Regional collaboration
- Arts, culture and heritage

KEY CHALLENGES

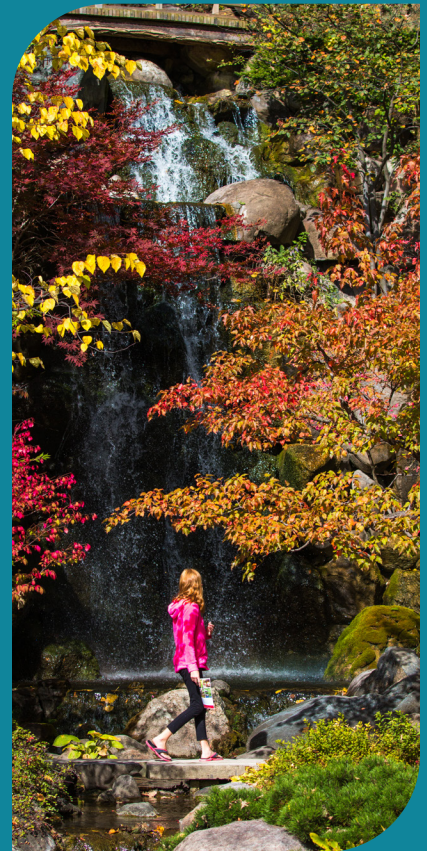
- Perception of crime and safety
- Attracting and retaining workforce
- Lack of public and multi modal transportation options
- Limited hotel product
- Declining civic pride

BIG IDEAS DINNER

GoRockford hosted a dinner with 150 community thought leaders and influencers to encourage them to think broadly and in big ways about the destination's future. Guest speakers from four destinations shared transformational ideas from their own communities that were intended to inspire new ideas for Rockford and the two-county region. Speakers included Kalene Griffith, president/CEO of Visit Bentonville in Arkansas; Marla Roe, executive director of Visit Frisco in Texas; Joshua Schamberger, president of Think Iowa City; and Mark Miller, manager director of planning and design from Downtown Grand Rapids Inc. in Michigan.

VISIONING WORKSHOP

The results and insights gleaned from these research activities were then used in a visioning workshop with the Steering Committee to picture the ideal future of tourism management in the Rockford region and to develop priorities for the plan.





RESIDENT SENTIMENT SURVEY

GoRockford commissioned a resident survey for the Rockford region in 2012, 2015, 2017, and as part of developing this plan in 2023. Each survey, or benchmark, varied in content and design, but all aimed to understand how current residents of the region felt about and perceived various aspects of the area, community, and tourism. MMGY NextFactor assisted with developing and administering the 2023 survey and Hargrove & Associates prepared the following analysis.

Over the four benchmarks administered, surveyed residents indicated that the importance of visitors and tourism has not decreased with regard to the effect on the Rockford region's economy. A closer examination of the 2023 results revealed that responses varied by demographic. For instance, the older the resident, the more likely they were to indicate that visitors and tourism are "Very Important." Another trend appeared: The higher the household income of the resident, the more likely they were to indicate that visitors and tourism are "Very Important."

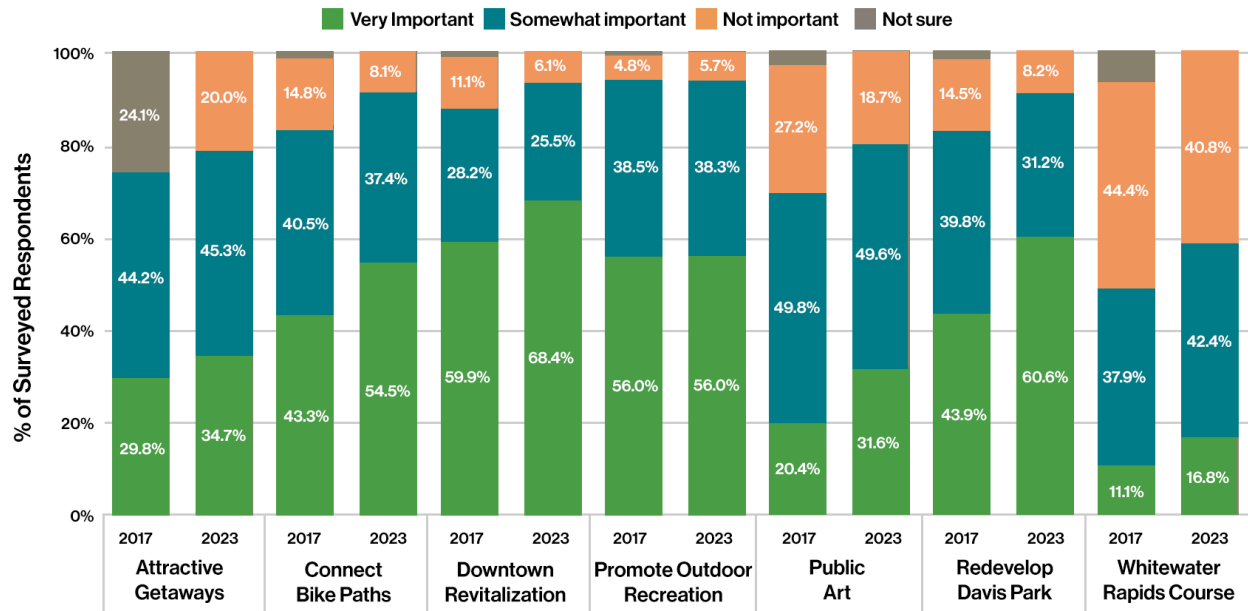
Looking at the region's qualities, "Parks / Outdoor Space / Natural Scenery" received the highest percentage of residents who indicated it as something they liked best about the area. "Safety & Crime Levels" received the highest percentage of residents who indicated it as something they liked least about the region. This aligns with the AI-summarized open-text responses, which most frequently mentioned improving safety and reducing crime when asked what would make the region more appealing to visitors. Sentiment around safety has improved, as surveyed residents of the Rockford region were more likely to report feeling safe in the area in 2023 than in 2017.

In the 2023 questionnaire, residents were asked about the importance of nine tourism initiatives and if they support funding the project. Four initiatives were identified to be of high importance and have high funding support: Connect Bike Paths, Downtown Revitalization, Promote Outdoor Recreation, and Redevelop Davis Park.

When asked if they were pleased with Rockford as a place to live, responses varied by ZIP Code and race/ethnicity. Overall, responses did not differ much from 2015 to 2023, but more residents were "Not Sure" in 2023.

In conclusion, these benchmark surveys demonstrate that there are many Rockford region residents who support the region's economic growth through improvements that help residents and attract tourists. Rockford, as a community, has been successful in some areas, over the years, and still has work to do in others. Overall, this research contributes to understanding resident sentiment and points toward promising avenues for future action.

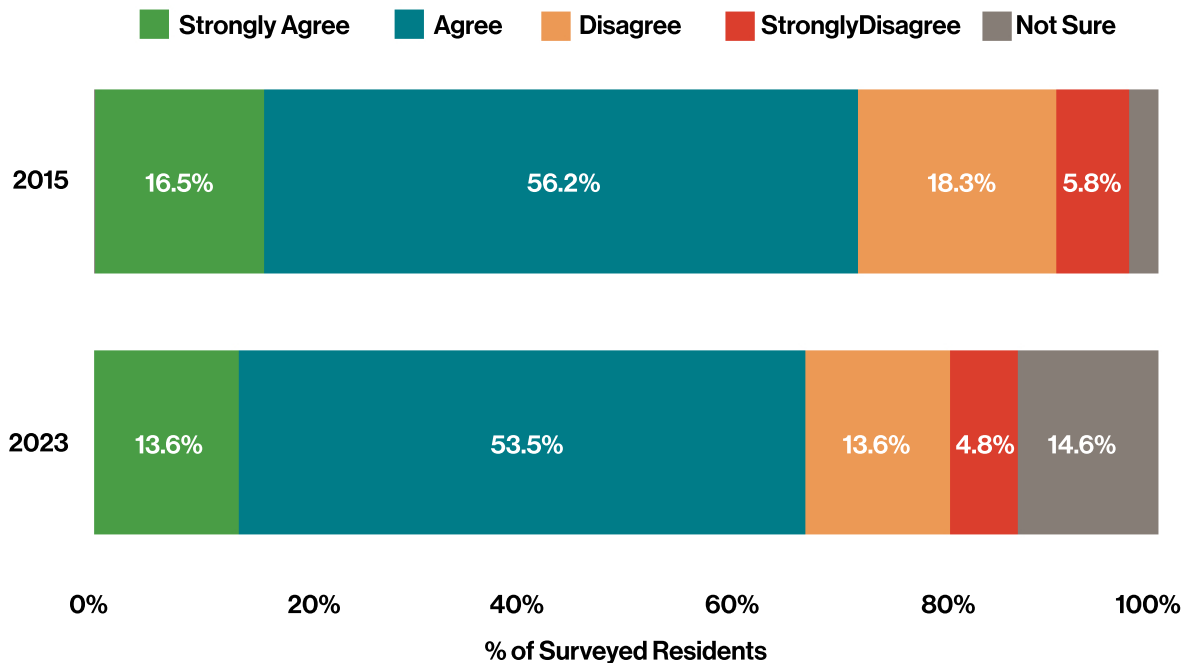
Figure 9: Longitudinal results by % of surveyed residents¹ of Boone and Winnebago counties in 2017 & 2023 when asked to indicate the level of importance for each tourism initiative.



¹Percent based on qualified respondents who answered each question; varied by project.

Referring to Figure 9, all tourism initiatives for the Rockford region increased in importance or had the same level of importance for surveyed residents from 2017 to 2023. Between 2017 and 2023, the importance of Redeveloping Davis Park had the largest increase. Downtown Revitalization is still viewed as the most important of the projects, with the highest percentage of residents indicating “Very Important” in both 2017 and 2023.

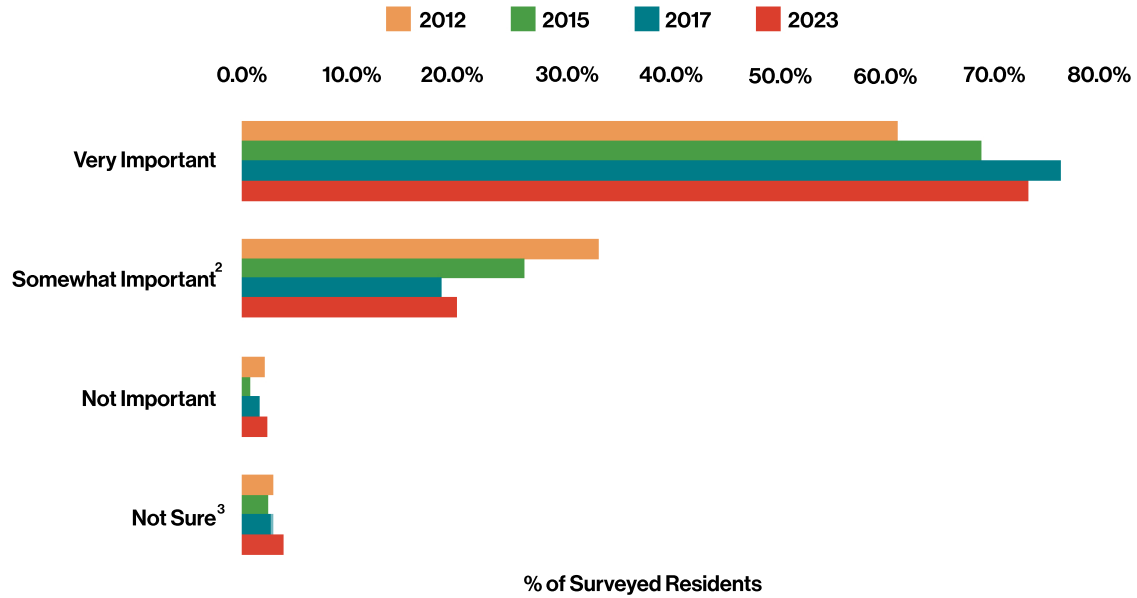
Figure 12: Percent of surveyed residents¹ of Boone and Winnebago counties in 2015 & 2023 when prompted, “I am pleased with the Rockford region as a place to live.”



¹Percent based on qualified respondents who answered the question (n=1578 in 2023 and n=1511 in 2015).

Referring to Figure 12, surveyed residents of the Rockford region indicated a slight decrease in all response categories from 2015 to 2023 except the “Not Sure” option, which increased from 3.8% to 14.6%. More respondents were unsure how they felt about living in the Rockford region in 2023 than in 2015.

Figure 1: Percent of surveyed residents¹ of Boone and Winnebago counties when asked, “How important are visitors and tourism to the Rockford region’s economy?” longitudinal results.



¹Percent based on qualified respondents who answered the question (n=1,581 in 2023, n= 1,898 in 2017, n=1,511 in 2015, and n=685 in 2012).

²“Somewhat important” was “important” in 2015 and 2012

³“Not sure” was “Don’t know” in 2015 and 2012.

Referring to Figure 1, responses show increasing importance from 2012 to 2017, with “Somewhat Important” shrinking and “Very Important” growing. The footnotes reveal that an answer to this question was changed from “Important” to “Somewhat Important” in 2017. Any change to a benchmark introduces a new variable. However, “Not Important” and “Not Sure” remained in the low single digits, indicating the importance of visitors and tourism to the Rockford region’s economy has not decreased from 2012 to 2023.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TAKEAWAYS

The following 10 key takeaways were culled from all the strategic insights gathered during the focus groups, town halls, one-on-one interviews, the DestinationNEXT Assessment and the resident sentiment survey. They provide pointed insight into the major opportunities to sustain and bolster Rockford's visitor economy, both short and long-term.

1

Residents are happy with their quality of life, and agree Rockford is headed in the right direction.

2

Young, urban travelers from diverse backgrounds view Rockford positively as a leisure destination due to its proximity to cities, attractions for families, including amateur sports, and a strong base of businesses owned by people from underrepresented communities.

3

The greatest needs for growing the sports market are funding and greater collaboration among public and private entities to increase available facilities and services.

4

Rockford has a significant opportunity to improve the appeal of the downtown, nightlife, arts and cultural attractions, and the creative personality of the destination.

5

Downtown revitalization is critical, with a significant number of residents agreeing it should be funded.

6

Local stakeholders rate Rockford's arts, cultural and heritage assets highly. However visitor research shows these are not always drivers of visitation to Rockford, particularly among regional tourists from Chicago and other markets known for their strong cultural scenes.

7

Public parks/gardens and outdoor recreation are the highest rated community assets among visitors, with dining, family attractions, festivals, quality hotels and shopping all rating above average.

8

Infrastructure investments are needed to address transportation and mobility needs for the workforce, residents and visitors (e.g. local airport, road repairs, parking, walkability, bike paths/trails).

9

Accommodation and food services, and arts and entertainment represent major local industries (5th and 13th largest respectively), with dynamic labor markets and high employer demand. Tourism career pathways and short-term skills training are needed to build in-demand hospitality skill sets.

10

The leadership and community value of the Rockford Area Convention & Visitors Bureau is widely recognized and appreciated.



METHODOLOGY

In development of this plan, the process engaged more than 170 stakeholders through a series of focus groups, in-depth interviews, and community town halls, all which took place between June 2023 and February 2024. In addition to the personal engagement, an online sentiment survey was shared with residents of the Rockford region, which garnered 2,016 responses.

The primary purpose of the engagement was to identify key opportunities and challenges for the future of the Rockford region as a destination for visitors and a quality place for residents to live, work and play.

Additionally, assessments of the destination were undertaken, including an assessment completed by MMGY NextFactor that measured how the destination's visitor economy is performing across a wide spectrum of indicators, a destination asset assessment undertaken by Hunden Partners, an analysis of the region's competitive position in the sports market was undertaken by Huddle Up Group, a visitor and prospective visitor perception assessment completed by SMARInsights and a recreation analysis completed by C2 Recreation Consulting.

REGION OF FOCUS

For this Destination Master Plan, the area of focus is the Rockford region, inclusive of Rockford, and Boone and Winnebago counties.

KEY OUTPUTS

All outputs from this planning process have been used to gain a deep understanding of the destination, including its strengths, its challenges, its gaps and its opportunities. Going forward, any of these outputs and studies may be used on their own to inform specific needs or used collectively. These include:

- DestinationNEXT Assessment
- Destination Asset Assessment
- Visitor Perception & Brand Positioning Study
- Outdoor Recreation Analysis
- Sport Facilities Analysis
- Resident Sentiment Survey Report
- Stakeholder Engagement Findings
- Strategic Goals and Initiatives of the Destination Master Plan



THRIVE 2035

STEERING COMMITTEE

Ann Wasser
Executive Director
Severson Dells Nature Center

David Anderson
Founding Family Member
Spring Creek Development
Group

Epic Jones
Artistic Director
West Side Show Room

Geno lafrate
President
Hard Rock Casino Rockford

Isaac Guerrero
Director of Economic
Development & Policy
Region 1 Planning Council

Janene Stephenson
President
Positive Reflections Outreach

Jennifer Furst
President
FurstStaffing

Kirk Weitzel
Partner
Rock Hospitality

Kyle York
Vice President, Small Business
Specialist
Illinois Bank & Trust

Laura Maher
Director of Communication
& Strategic Initiatives
City of Rockford

Luevinus Muhammad
Director of Student Life
& Intercultural Student Services
Rock Valley College

Louis Mateus
General Manager
Rockford Park District

Marco Lenis
President & CEO
Vocational Rehabilitation
Management

Mary McNamara Bernsten
Executive Director
Rockford Area Arts Council

Michael Brien
Director of Natural Resources
Forest Preserves of Winnebago
County

Mustafa Abdall
President
Greater Rockford Arab
Chamber of Commerce

Patricia Diduch, AICP
Planning & Development
Administrator
Village of Rockton

Rebecca Francis
CEO & Lead Consultant
Ignite Change Solutions

Ricardo Montoya Picazo
Chief of Staff
Illinois House of Representatives
68th District

Richard Shuga
Business Representative &
Organizer
Painters District Council No. 30,
Local 607

Sarah Wolf
(Retired) Executive Director
Discovery Center Museum

Shelton Kay
Executive Director
Rockford Regional Health
Council

Steve Forss
Trails Maintenance & Program
Coordinator
Rockford Park District

Sydney Turner
Director of Planning &
Programming
Region 1 Planning Council

Dr. Sheila Hill
Co-founder
Think Big!

Theodore Duckett
Business Account Manager
The Workforce Connection

This work was supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce and the State of Illinois to support the critical recovery and growth of the tourism and hospitality industry following the COVID-19 pandemic.

This Destination Master Plan provides a road map to ensure the industry reaches its full potential for the benefit of those who work in it, but also for the broader prosperity and sustainability of our communities.

PROJECT TEAM

GOROCKFORD

John Groh
President & CEO

Kristen Paul
Executive Vice President

Joanne Nold
VP Finance & Administration

Lindsay Arellano
VP Sales & Service

Diane Morgenthaler
Strategic Consultant

BELVIDERE AREA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Amy Nord
Executive Director

GRINDSTONE STRATEGIC

Angela Kay Larson
President & Chief Strategy Advisor

CONSULTING TEAM

MMGY NEXTFACTOR

Cassandra McAuley
Managing Director

Deb Archer
Executive Consultant

Shelly Green
Executive Consultant

Jé-Vonna Sampson
Director, Destination Planning

Teresa Allan
Senior Manager, Client Success

Dinete Kollanur
Manager, Destination
Development

HUNDEN PARTNERS
(Destination Assessment /
Workforce Assessment)

Rob Hunden
President & CEO

Shawn Gustafson
Project Manager

Lexi Cuff
Project Analyst

Morgan Wortham
Economic Development
Specialist

SMARINSIGHTS
(Visitor Perception)

Jordan Musall
Research Analyst

EIGHT FIFTEEN CAPITAL LLC
(Community Engagement)

Terrance Hall
Partner

Joshua Patterson
Partner

Matthew Simpson
Partner

C2 RECREATION CONSULTING
(Outdoor Recreation Assessment)

Chris Bernhardt
Principal

**HARGROVE &
ASSOCIATES INC.**
(Resident Survey Analysis)

Kathryn Zessman
Research Designer



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