The Shreveport Regional Airport announced that Vision Airlines, a new low-cost airline that will provide service from Shreveport to Destin, Florida beginning in April. This is part of a mega-expansion plan for Vision Airlines to offer low-fare, direct flights to many mid-sized communities. The tourist bureau is assisting with marketing the new flight.

Sci-Port Louisiana’s Science Center announced that Cathy Williamson - a Caddo Parish Education Coordinator - was named the Distinguished Informal Science Educator of the Year by the Louisiana Science Teachers Association. The award is designed to recognize one non-classroom teacher who has made extraordinary contributions to the advancement of science education.

Courtyard by Marriott at the Boardwalk has been nominated for awards including Courtyard Opening Hotel of the Year. General Manager Scott Douglas has been nominated for Courtyard Opening General Manager of the Year, but says his staff makes it easy by going above and beyond. Winners of the awards will be announced in March at Courtyard’s annual conference.

ZeneScene has a new mobile application and website for a location-based social network. ZeneScene is a customizable search engine to serve as Shreveport-Bossier’s premier entertainment hub that can be accessed and shared via website and a network. ZeneScene is a customizable search engine to serve as Shreveport-Bossier’s premier entertainment hub that can be accessed and shared via website and a network.

The four governing bodies of Caddo and Bossier Parish – Shreveport City Council, Caddo Parish Commission, Bossier City Council and Bossier Parish Police Jury – have partnered in an unprecedented manner to bolster sports tourism by forming the Shreveport-Bossier Sports Commission, a division of the tourist bureau.

The goal of Shreveport Mayor Cedric Glover and Bossier City Mayor Lorenz Walker and its allied partners is to strengthen and facilitate sporting events. "We believe that in the spirit of regional sports efforts, we can coordinate, promote, market, manage and facilitate sporting events, thereby increasing the positive economic impact on the entire Northwest Louisiana region," said Mayor Glover.

Mayor Walker said, "The tourist bureau has the staff expertise, resources and successful collaboration with multiple organizations to undertake this new endeavor." The benefit to sports rights holders is the Shreveport-Bossier Sports Commission under the tourist bureau will be able to provide a simple, one-stop shop. "Doing business in Shreveport-Bossier will become more streamlined, maximizing resources and enhancing sporting events in the region," said Rick Avery, president of the Bossier Parish Police Jury.

"In the past people saw the Red River as the great divider," said John Escude, former president of the Caddo Parish Police Jury. "Now more and more it is something that unites us because we are greater together pursuing the same goal – to leave our community better than we found it."

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Mardi Gras - once a best kept secret

Mardi Gras in Shreveport-Bossier was once one of the best kept secrets. But visitors and groups are having such fun it is spreading that northwest Louisiana knows how to party. For groups, the Shreveport-Bossier Convention and Visitor Bureau hosts an annual Mardi Gras Bash on the banks of the Red River in downtown Shreveport for both major parade weekends - Krewe of Centaur, Feb. 26, and Krewe of Gemini, March 5. About 450 people with the various group tours participated in both parades and it had an economic impact of about $85,482.

Participants, who came from Texas, Tennessee, Arkansas and as far away as North Carolina, were treated to a visit from the Mardi Gras krewe's, Cajun food, live music, a tour of the Roasts, and an up close spot on the parade route to catch hundreds of Mardi Gras beads and doubloons.

"The group tour market consists of mostly seniors who love to celebrate Mardi Gras in a fun, family-atmosphere," said Erica Howard, leisure sales manager. "The Mardi Gras Bash allows us to generate new business, as well as maintaining repeat business year after year."

In conjunction with this year's Bash, the bureau hosted 13 travel writers. Although the focus of the tours was Mardi Gras, the journalists visited area attractions. They represented traditional and online publications and write about travel for families, culture, romance, luxury and more.

Equally as important, the tourist bureau hosted six meeting planners from Washington, DC, Pennsylvania, and Texas. The planners anticipate bringing meetings here as early as September and November 2011, while others are looking at future years.

Tourist bureau reaches out to hotels with new opportunities

The tourist bureau, recognizing the importance of a diversified tourism mix, brought in nationally renowned sales trainer Janie Wiltshire. In February, Janie met with the tourist bureau sales staff and local hoteliers to share her expertise on making successful sales calls and closing the deal, qualifying potential business clients, and getting the most out of databases.

Kim Brice, vice president of convention marketing, said this training was invaluable. Forecasts are expected to be down for the oil and gas business that boosted many hotels occupancy to 80 and 90 percent in 2010, so a shift in effort is required.

"Hotels must get back to working the leads we send and become proactive in bidding on future conventions and group tours," Kim said.

Mardi Gras in Shreveport-Bossier was included for the first time in the New Market Tour that will include several group tour dates from October 2011 to May 2012. Other stops on the tour include Forth Worth, Texas; Little Rock, Ark.; Memphis, Tenn., and New Orleans.

Vice President of Convention Marketing Kim Brice is a board of director for the Destination Marketing International Association. She represented Shreveport-Bossier at a board meeting held in February in Washington, DC and made follow-up sales calls.

Diana Doogan, regional sales manager, booked her first conference as a result of attending the Meetings Trend Show, Nov. 2010 in Washington, DC. The MIL Head Start Grantee Training "I Am Moving, I Am Learning" meeting will be held, March 28-31, 2011. Hilton Shreveport and the Shreveport Convention Center will be the host sites. Pathe Inc., a private, northern Virginia based company plans 58-plus government contracted meetings nationwide.

Internet & Systems Manager Pat Gill is working with Zero Defects Design to make some upgrades to ShreveportBossierFunGuide.com. Users can now make comments on events and organizations, view maps of event venues and generate code to include on their organization's events on their own website.

Suzanne Mandrel, convention sales manager, attended the annual Louisiana Society Association Executives Conference in Lafayette. She networked and made sales calls in Lafayette and Alexandria, as part of that trip. The Louisiana Federation of Housing, Inc. based in Lafayette are considering Shreveport-Bossier as host city for its 2012 or 2013 annual meeting.

Suzanne received eight requests for proposals from planners at the Religious Conference Managers Association annual conference in Tampa, Florida. The Skills USA Championship Conference, she had been working on, turned definite and the group will meet here, April 6-8, 2011.

Brandy Evans, vice president of communications, has been speaking to local groups about the importance of tourism. She spoke to the Shreveport Rotary, Altusra and Elvis Angels Fan Club. If you would like to get an update on tourism, contact her at bevans@sbctb.com or 429-0638.

Your Bureau at Work