

# Armstrong: The dollars and sense of tourism

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Published: Tuesday, March 14, 2017 5:30 a.m. CDT

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The financial climate in Illinois has created many issues for our residents that are far-reaching and devastating to many sectors of our economy. We all are scrutinizing budgets to ensure our dollars are spent wisely with programs and services that provide the most return on investment.

We must continue to fund what is working. The tourism sector is working and thriving.

Visitor spending dollars are up and continue to be a part of the solution to our economic challenges. In 2015, visitor spending generated more than \$32 billion for the state budget. That visitor spending saves the average family of four \$1,300 in taxes. The return on investment for each \$1 spent in promotion produces \$6 in return.

The mission of the DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau is to generate economic impact and promote the county as a premiere destination for business and leisure travel 50 miles outside of our radius. A certified bureau has exclusive opportunities, access and reach that aren't available to other tourism organizations. Our bureau is the official liaison with the Illinois Office of Tourism and has direct access to Director of Tourism Cory Jobe and his staff.

Our bureau has a proven track record of success. For the past seven years, visitor spending in DeKalb County has been on the rise. It's no coincidence that those dollars increased when the DCCVB was certified as the Destination Marketing Organization for DeKalb County tourism by the Illinois Office of Tourism. Our marketing and promotion efforts helped generate \$91.3 million from visitor spending for DeKalb County in 2015. These dollars go back into the local economy and keep our businesses, organizations and governmental bodies thriving.

Local investment dollars are critical to our success and are required to be eligible to receive additional grants. Only certified bureaus can receive a matching grant from the state to promote tourism. So, when local dollars are invested with the DCCVB, we double our money to promote DeKalb County to visitors.

The matching grant is called the Local Tourism Certified Bureau grant. Because of our bureau's success, we have gone from an LTCB grant of \$55,000 to \$92,787 in fiscal 2017. We have nearly doubled the amount of money that we earned from the LTCB grant in just five years.

Here are just a few examples of what the DCCVB does to generate economic impact from visitor spending. Last week, we provided on-site tours of hotel and conference venues for a group that was looking for a location to host their event. Together, with several of our local venues, we convinced the event organizers that DeKalb County was the right location.

Our efforts resulted in booking 336 hotel room nights over the course of a three-day event. More than 1,500 visitors will travel to this area for this event. They will be sleeping, eating, shopping, buying gas and experiencing the best of DeKalb County during their stay. The estimated economic impact of this

event is \$150,000. This one event will generate almost as much money as our entire bureau budget for the year.

In the same 48-hour period, we finalized our part of the arrangements required for the IESA State Wrestling Championships that were held at the NIU Convocation Center last weekend. That event brought in 5,000 visitors and more than 450 hotel room nights and had an estimated economic impact of \$250,000.

In addition to that, we booked a tour group of 40 that will visit the area in July. All of this is being accomplished with a staff of 1.5.

It's always easier to understand something when you can put yourself into a situation. Let's say your family is headed out on a road trip to that sports tournament, dance competition or educational camp. Here's what you are likely to spend that contributes to the bottom line for local businesses.

Most likely, you'll need to book a hotel room for at least one night. But it's not just about hotels. You'll have to fill up the van with gas. You will probably make a trip to the grocery store to purchase snacks so the kids won't get "hangry." Of course, you'll look for a couple of great local places to dine, too, even if it's a day trip.

If you have any free time, you may do some shopping and explore local attractions. You might even have to stop and buy sweatshirts or ponchos because the forecast called for sunny and warm and it turned out to be cloudy with showers. That's how visitor spending keeps the economy thriving.

Now, imagine those dollars were spent in the local businesses owned by your neighbors, friends and family in DeKalb County. That's how important those visitor dollars are. An investment in tourism promotion with the DCCVB has proven to be a good return on investment for the county.

Thank you to all our stakeholders, board members and hospitality partners for your continued support! Safe travels!

- Debbie Armstrong is executive director of the DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

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