2018 was a very good year for travel and tourism in DeKalb County. Last month, DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau Executive Director Debbie Armstrong highlighted in this space that tourism contributed nearly $99 million to the local economy over the past year. The figure represents the eighth straight year of economic growth in travel and tourism dollars both locally and in the state.

Contributing to this growth is the burgeoning craft beer, spirits and wine industry. The state is fertile ground for these types of businesses, most of which are small, family-owned enterprises. The Illinois Office of Tourism supports these artisans and other “makers” through its Illinois Made initiative. The program pays homage to the inventors, farmers, artisans and makers who helped build the communities of our state by celebrating current individuals and businesses who embrace the same pioneering spirit of their ancestors.

Two Illinois Made designees – Whiskey Acres and Jonamac Orchard – are among DeKalb County’s five artisans nominated for the Illinois Made program. Forge Brewhouse, Prairie State Winery and Waterman Winery along with Whiskey Acres and Jonamac Orchard comprise the DeKalb County Bold Spirits group. August’s inaugural Bold Spirits tasting event was a big success, drawing visitors from nearby and outside the area to get a sip and sample of what these area entrepreneurs have to offer. The recent opening of Whiskey Acres’ new visitors center and other planned enhancements by local makers, artisans and attractions provide much to look forward to in 2019.

Adding to the excitement of the new year is the planned renovations to one of the county’s most-visited attractions, the Egyptian Theatre. The multimillion-dollar improvements, which will include the installation of air conditioning in the 90-year-old historic landmark, will allow year-round programming at the theater, enhancing the entertainment options for its patrons and visitors to the area. The Egyptian Theatre and the Sandwich Opera House, which adorns the cover of the 2019 DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau visitors guide, provide the county with two of the most historic and unique entertainment attractions in the region.

2019 also marks the grand opening of a new home for the DeKalb County History Center. The organization was established last year and is a partnership between the Sycamore History Museum and the Joiner History Room, plus collaboration with 20-plus local history organizations throughout the county. The center’s new 7,600-square-foot building located at 1730 N. Main St. in Sycamore is scheduled to open in May and will house exhibits, artifacts and information about the history of DeKalb County.

The Illinois High School Association State Football Championships are back in the county in 2019. Northern Illinois University’s Huskie Stadium will host the two-day, eight-game tournament for a fourth time, and the IHSA Destination DeKalb host committee is already making plans to welcome prep football student-athletes, spirit squads, high school bands and fans to the area during Thanksgiving weekend. The event provides a terrific opportunity to highlight the county as a visitor destination, and IHSA Destination DeKalb has earned praise over the years from IHSA officials, fans and teams for the hospitality extended to them by local event volunteers and organizers.
Another major youth sporting event that has found a home in DeKalb County is the Illinois Elementary School Association Wrestling Championships. NIU has hosted the IESA Wrestling Championships for 20 years, and last year the Convocation Center won the bid for the tournament to remain in DeKalb through 2023. The event contributed approximately $300,000 to the local economy during last year’s competition. The championships will expand the number of competitors by about one-third for this year’s tournament, meaning more travelers will be visiting the county on March 8 and 9 event and for years to come.

These events, attractions and initiatives are only a sampling of things that should contribute to 2019 being a year of excitement and continued growth for travel and tourism in the county. What better resolution for the new year than for area residents and those beyond our borders to explore and engage in the great destinations, businesses and entertainment options that are available right in our own backyard.

• Brad Hoey is president of the DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau Board of Directors.

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