Two representatives from the DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau had the good fortune to attend the 2019 Illinois Governor's Conference on Travel & Tourism on Feb. 4 to 6 at the historic Palmer House Hilton in downtown Chicago.

This conference is the state's premier industry event where professionals from across the state and around the country come together to network and learn about the latest trends and innovative ideas for promoting travel. Many of the professionals were from attractions, such as Whiskey Acres, and also in attendance, and destination marketing organizations, like the DCCVB, which were eager to hear from state leaders, travel experts and special guests during breakout sessions and keynote presentations.

The Illinois Excellence in Tourism Awards Dinner was the official kickoff of the conference. Gov. J.B. Pritzker extended a warm welcome to the hundreds of attendees and thanked the group for making Illinois a top destination for visitors from around the world. During his brief, yet uplifting, speech, the governor declared a strong show of support, stating his commitment to the travel and tourism industry. "I look forward to continuing to promote our state and everything it has to offer. Together, we will build a better and brighter future for everyone that calls Illinois home," Pritzker said.

Throughout the conference, there were ample opportunities for DCCVB staff to network with fellow colleagues from neighboring counties and throughout Illinois, which was a personal highlight of the conference. A productive brainstorming and planning meeting took place among the 20 CVBs that make up Tour Illinois (DCCVB included) for the upcoming Midwest Marketplace trade show April 7 to 9 at Eagle Ridge Resort in Galena. Tour Illinois will be highlighting and promoting various regions represented throughout Illinois to group tour organizers with Circle Wisconsin, a statewide membership organization representing Wisconsin's destinations, attractions, restaurants, theaters, casinos and museums. One feature of Midwest Marketplace will include a Tour Illinois-sponsored dinner and a presentation highlighting the upcoming Tour Illinois website. Stay tuned for details posted soon on the DCCVB website, dekalbcountycvb.com.

Trade shows are just one example of how the DCCVB, as the designated destination marketing organization for DeKalb County, has feet on the ground promoting the amazing events and attractions our county has to offer.

Breakout sessions and keynote presentations yielded quite a few nuggets of insight, including some of the latest trends in travel and tourism. For instance, marketing to children. While this is not a new concept, the fact that children are now considered to be the main decision-makers of the family, not the parents or grandparents, is. Why? Because children influence and steer the adults in their lives toward exactly what they want, most of the time.

Then there's the PANK population – Professional Aunts with No Kids. Ever heard of this growing group of fun-seekers? The financially secure aunties of the world want to dote on their nieces and nephews while experiencing adventures and making special memories with them. PANKs prefer several suggestions or options over specific travel packages to their destinations of choice.
On the final day of the conference, Jan Kemmerling, acting deputy director of the Illinois Office of Tourism, presented the annual State of the State Tourism Address. Kemmerling recapped the success of Illinois Tourism’s marketing initiatives and programs and stated the following facts: Illinois welcomed about 114 million visitors in 2017, an all-time high. Visitor spending totaled $39.7 billion, up 3.5 percent from 2016, and generated more than $3 billion in state and local tax revenue. International visitor spending reached nearly $3.4 billion, an increase of 5.2 percent in 2017. Illinois’ tourism industry supported 337,100 jobs in 2017, an increase of 20,200 jobs since 2015.

To read the Illinois Office of Tourism press release, visit media.enjoyillinois.com/press-releases/illinois-tourism-announces-record-growth. While the numbers for 2018 won’t be available for months, the results seem promising.

The Illinois Governor’s Conference on Travel and Tourism is an annual reminder of the industry’s power on Illinois’ economy. People want experiences over things, and multitudes are choosing to “Enjoy Illinois.” Tourism continues to have a vital impact on communities at the state and local levels. To view the economic impact of tourism in DeKalb County, visit http://dekalbcountycvb.com/economic-impact-of-tourism. The proof is in the numbers.

• Erin Reynolds is the sales coordinator for the DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

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