

Armstrong: Tourism injects \$93M into county economy

11:09 am

The Illinois Office of Tourism announced that domestic and international travel expenditures reached \$37.9 billion in 2016 – a \$571 million increase from 2015.

This follows the state's record-breaking domestic Illinois tourism figures released in May, which highlighted an increase of 1 million travelers to the state in 2016.

DeKalb County contributed to Illinois' robust economic domestic growth, to the tune of \$93.88 million in travel expenditures (a 2.83 percent increase) and \$1.58 million in local tax revenue (a 7.54 percent increase). Additionally, the tourism industry created 10,000 new jobs across the state, with 20 of them in DeKalb County.

DeKalb County has a lot to be proud of. Visitor spending increased by \$2.58 million in 2016.

We have an exciting future ahead as work continues on developing the region and impacting local communities. These 2016 numbers reflect the dedication and vigorous work that our tourism partners are devoting to growing their businesses to attract more visitors to the county.

It also reflects the success of the marketing and sales work that the DeKalb County Convention and Visitors Bureau does to promote the area.

DeKalb County has a thriving tourism industry. Tourism is a cornerstone of economic development. Great attractions and events draw visitors to the area. That leads to a robust economy, new housing, new businesses and a better quality of life for our residents.

The dollars our bureau helped generate from visitor spending are up for the eighth year in a row. It's no coincidence that these numbers correlate with the certification from the Illinois Office of Tourism awarded to the DCCVB.

We are the state-designated Destination Marketing Organization for DeKalb County. I was hired to make that happen. It took two years to meet the requirements to even file for a certification review.

Our bureau was awarded certification on the first attempt. We feel just as proud of that achievement as we do the vigorous work our board and staff put in to keep the visitor spending economic impact growing.

We are seeing expansion in our agritainment tourism market and additional events being added throughout the region. Arts, culture, sports and our bold spirits artisans are our premiere niche markets. Our region is a strong draw for weddings, conferences, special events and tour groups.

Two of our attractions are recipients of the coveted "Illinois Made" award that is selected by the Illinois Office of Tourism. Whiskey Acres was awarded this distinguished honor last fall and Jonamac Orchard was awarded in May.

We have increased our visibility by investing more marketing dollars in social media channels, more print ads and new seasonal videos. Our website traffic has increased by 34 percent over last year's numbers.

More people are choosing to make DeKalb County a destination because of our efforts to keep DeKalb County top of mind with travelers.

Although the figures collected by the U.S. Travel Association are preliminary – final numbers will be released later this year – tourism officials said these numbers indicate that every dollar invested in tourism in Illinois generates \$9 in return.

Illinois attracted 110 million visitors in 2016, an increase of about 1 million from 2015. Eighty three percent were visiting for leisure and the rest were here on business.

Domestic travelers spent nearly \$35 billion in Illinois in 2016. That was a 1.8 percent increase over 2015, and generated \$2.6 billion in state and local tax revenue.

"One of the beautiful things about Illinois is the variety of experiences you can enjoy across the state – whether you're looking for family-friendly activities, outdoor adventure, delicious food or an amazing road trip," said Cory Jobe, director of the Illinois Office of Tourism. "By bringing new money to our stores, hotels and attractions, visitors have the power to create a tangible economic impact for our communities. Our success as a state depends on each county doing their part to promote the diverse ways visitors can experience their own amazing moments in Illinois."

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

