

# As the Rivers & Routes region rebounds: ‘It’s our time to shine’

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The outlook for 2023 could be seen all throughout the room at this year’s Tourism Summit. With bright splashes of orange and blue topped with a genuine sharing of “Heartbeats,” everyone seemed to agree with the day’s declaration:

This year will be “our time to shine.” Well over 400 attendees gathered at Collinsville’s Gateway Convention Center for the sold-out event on Thursday, Feb. 9. The gathering, hosted by the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau, celebrated all that there is to do and see in Southwest Illinois.

“We even have a little something to help get things fired up,” Tourism Bureau President/CEO Cory Jobe promised as he made his way around the room welcoming people as they arrived.

And it wasn’t long before a New Orleans-style jazz ensemble reminiscent of NOLA’s front line tradition circled around the room to kick off the festivities.

The musical parade was followed by a paired fountain of pyrotechnics from each stage corner and a subsequent welcome from the City of Collinsville and Great Rivers & Routes leaders.

During his keynote presentation, Jobe shared the addition of new tourism products and strong destination marketing that will be key to tourism growth this year. He noted that the region was on the rebound, seeing a marked increase in 2022 in both travelers and traveler spending in the region.

As a certified destination marketing organization, the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau region includes Madison, Jersey, Calhoun, Macoupin, Montgomery and Greene counties as well as East St. Louis in St. Clair County. The region is poised uniquely, as “the only destination where the Mother Road and the River Road meet.”

“Why does tourism matter?” Jobe asked during his presentation. “Our regional economy depends on tourism – it means thousands of jobs for our residents, millions in economic activity for businesses and millions more in local taxes to our communities. Tourism benefits everyone in southwest Illinois,” he answered.

Jobe’s answer was backed up with facts from the Illinois Office of Tourism.

Visitor spending improved in 2021 (the most recent year of economic data) to near pre-pandemic levels.

The region saw visitor spending of \$700 million, with the largest increase in spending occurring in Jersey County which was driven by activity at Pere Marquette State Park and in Grafton.

In 2022, the six-county region saw hotel occupancy increase 5.1 percent, hotel



A New Orleans-style jazz ensemble on parade helps kick off the 2023 Tourism Summit hosted by Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau on Feb. 9 at the Gateway Convention Center in Collinsville. (Melissa Crockett Meske/Illinois Business Journal)

revenue was up 5 percent, and the average daily rate was up 11.3 percent. Hotel revenues saw a 6.5 percent increase year-over-year, with \$108.9 million earned.

Motorcoach and education groups, as well as cruise ship dockings, made up the year’s group sales impact. The region also hosted 43 sporting events, with over 56,000 attending, and a total economic impact from sports and group tours of \$8 million.

Jobe noted much of the increase was due to strong marketing efforts utilizing video, digital ads, print and paid social. He also pointed to enhanced sports tourism, outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism efforts as added reasons for tourism’s indelible mark on the region’s economy.

At the start of 2023, the Bureau unveiled a new video docuseries called “Heartbeats,” which takes a deeper look into the passionate people who share their stories about why Southwest Illinois is a great place to call home.

Plans as the year continues to roll out include an expansion of the Bureau’s video efforts with a planned TV channel slated to debut later in 2023, riversandroutes.tv. A new podcast series is also on tap.

The region will also see the opening of a new Route 66 museum and visitor center at the new West End Station in Edwardsville. The revitalized Cannonball Jail in Carlinville is further expected to open in 2023, adding more Route 66 products to the “Last 100 Miles of Route 66.”

Three businesses that had been inducted into the class of Illinois Makers 2022 were also honored during the Tourism Summit. Honorees included Old Herald Brewery & Distillery in Collinsville, Aria’s Cookies and Confections in East Alton, and Three Rivers Community Farm in rural Elsah.

Several businesses, organizations and individuals who have “made a difference throughout the region with new prod-



President/CEO Cory Jobe welcomes the over 400-attendee crowd at the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau’s 2023 summit at the Gateway Convention Center in Collinsville on Feb. 9. (Melissa Crockett Meske/Illinois Business Journal)



The room was packed at the Gateway Convention Center in Collinsville on Feb. 9, as the sold-out 2023 Tourism Summit hosted by the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau got underway. (Melissa Crockett Meske/Illinois Business Journal)

ucts, events, and businesses” were also presented with awards. These included:

- New Attraction: Aerie’s Resort in Grafton for the new Aerie’s Alpine Coaster. It is the first alpine coaster in Illinois featuring 4,000 feet of track with seven hair pin turns and eight waves and twistlers.
- Partner of the Year: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Corps’ leadership was recognized for providing high-quality outdoor and water-based recreation experiences.
- Friend of Tourism: Former Illinois State Senator Rachelle Crowe. Crowe was honored as a champion of the hospitality and tourism industry during her tenure in the state legislature, leading efforts for the Bureau to receive a \$10 million Capital Grant.
- New Start-Up: FLOCK Food Truck Park in Alton. Owners Matt and Laura Windisch were honored for creating a friendly food truck park in Alton where friends and family come together for amazing food and craft cocktails.

- New Venue: Herald Square in Collinsville. Herald Square is a new outdoor entertainment venue adjacent to Old Herald Brewery & Distillery which quickly has become a popular gathering place in the community.
  - New Festival or Event: ‘Cue & Brew Festival in Edwardsville. As a pro and backyard BBQ competition paired up with local beer, proceeds from the annual event will benefit the Edwardsville Community Foundation.
- “Each year I look forward to our annual tourism summit,” Jobe noted following the event. “Today we celebrated with over 400 people the power of travel and tourism in southwest Illinois. Thank you to our sponsors, city and state officials, DMO colleagues from across the state, media and agency partners, our board of directors, sites and attractions, hotel operators, and friends for an incredible day. This is our time to shine!”

■ See SHINE, Page 22, for more photos

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