



Road Map For Recovery Highlights Annual Tourism Summit

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ALTON - The road to economic and tourism recovery in the Great Rivers & Routes region of southwest Illinois will be paved with the survival of small businesses and the return of visitors seeking a safe road trip destination. That message was delivered during the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau's annual Tourism Summit held virtually on YouTube, Thursday, Jan. 21.

"2020 was an unprecedented year for the hospitality and tourism industry," Cory Jobe, President and CEO of the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau noted during the Summit. "Across the country, nearly 5 million jobs have been lost since March, thousands of small businesses have shuttered, and tourism revenue losses are in the billions. Finding ways to support our local small businesses, delicious destinations and our attractions has been our top priority and will continue to be."

Economic recovery in the region will rely heavily on the return of visitors eager for a safe road trip experience in 2021, according to Jobe. He anticipates a "robust comeback" beginning in May with overnight stays picking up and peaking by Labor Day.

"Travel demand for the lesser known, off the beaten path destinations, will be stronger than ever before," Jobe said. "Travelers looking for open spaces, unique experiences, outdoor adventure and connectivity with loved ones in a safe environment will be our focus."

In addition, Jobe said a more coordinated effort between stakeholders in the region to attract more sporting events will help fuel the economy now and in the long term. The region is seeing strong interest from domestic motor coach groups starting later this year. In addition to highlighting the Road Map to Recovery, the bureau honored 10 regional businesses who stepped up during the COVID pandemic with creative community support efforts or who created unique activities and events for residents and visitors alike.

Presented with the **Hometown Hero Awards** for lending a helping hand were:

222 Artisan Bakery, Edwardsville: The bakery served free breakfasts to children who no longer had access to school breakfast options when remote learning went in to effect in the Spring of 2020. The bakery also collaborated with Afterwards Books and served as a place for children to pick up requested books. This continues to be an on-going service.

Morrison's Irish Pub, Alton: Staff at Morrison's set up a Community Food Pantry outside the Irish pub in downtown Alton. People could donate or pick up food and other essentials at the free stand.

Old Herald Brewery & Distillery, Collinsville: When the pandemic hit, owners of the three-year-old brewery decided to switch their brew process from distilled spirits to much needed hand sanitizer products for area residents.

Sammi's Sandwiches, Alton: Food service workers who were suddenly out of jobs due to the statewide lock down received a helping hand from Sammi's. Meat, cheese and bread were provided to those out of work restaurant employees during the pandemic.

Goshen Coffee, Edwardsville: Free bulk coffee was supplied to area restaurants during the early months of the pandemic.

Bluestem Vodka, Bethalto: During COVID, the distillery switched its process into production of 3,000 gallons of hand sanitizer.

The bureau also presented **Game Changer Awards** to organizations and businesses who created unique ways to experience the region during COVID. Honored were:

Pere Marquette State Park, Grafton: Site Interpreter Kayla Alexander created a series of eagle watching videos that can be downloaded through a QR code. The videos encourage eagle watching in the region while practicing social distancing.

Collinsville Parks and Rec Department: Park Director Kim Caughran led the department's efforts to create socially distancing events throughout the year including a Drive Way Dance Party and outdoor activities at city parks.

Kicks on 66 Car Show, Edwardsville: Ryan O'Day led the efforts to hold a Route 66 car drive in and car show in the city. Hundreds of classic and vintage autos and thousands of spectators were part of this inaugural event.

Litchfield Tourism: Litchfield Tourism Coordinator Sarah Waggoner developed a series of videos encouraging residents and travelers to take advantage of the outdoor spaces in Litchfield, including Lake Lou Yaeger, during the pandemic.

The Virtual Tourism Summit was made possible with the help of the City of Collinsville and the Gateway Convention Center, Collinsville.