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## Visit Beloit looks back on rebound year

By AUSTIN MONTGOMERY Staff Writer

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Visit Beloit Executive Director Celestino Ruffini explains future plans for the first floor space at the 656 Pleasant St. building, the former site of St. Paul's Catholic Church and the Angel Museum. The space is now the permanent home of Visit Beloit. Reconstruction of the property began in 2020 and work will start back up again in the next two years. The stained glass windows will remain as part of the redevelopment, along with the original hardwood floors found during demolition.

Austin Montgomery/Beloit Daily News

BELOIT – Visit Beloit Executive Director Celestino Ruffini and his team at Beloit's tourism agency say they are optimistic following a successful year that saw rebounds in increased visitors to the area as key projects to attract travelers continue to progress.

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In 2020, Visit Beloit spent the entire year assisting businesses in the city's tourism sector pick up the pieces following lockdowns due to the pandemic. But in 2021, Ruffini said the organization saw a steady rebound in the number of visitors, hotel stays and increased business travel.

“The biggest difference between 2020 and this year have been businesses opening up again,” Ruffini said.

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A key indicator of the rebound has been Visit Beloit's tracking of the total number of ongoing and special events planned in the area, with the upcoming weekend to feature nearly 50 events compared to just three months ago when only a dozen events were being held on an average weekend.

Business travel has also slowly grown back that's supplemented gaps between weekends. The increase in business travel has also spurred hotel occupancy to rise, Ruffini noted.

“There's continued demand locally and visitors are coming into the area at rates similar to 2019,” Ruffini added.

At the welcome center at the interstate, Ruffini said the center had seen just shy of 13,000 visitors this summer, bringing the total number of visitors to the center to around 46,000 this year.

Work on interstate construction on I-43 and I-39/90 is expected to wrap up this fall.

Heading into winter, Ruffini said his group will monitor vaccination rates and be in contact with area restaurants, hotels and other businesses in case COVID-19 conditions change in the area.

“These last few weekends, families are going to make the most of what they can before winter kicks in,” Ruffini said.

Internally, Visit Beloit offices at the former Angel Museum on Pleasant Street are now open and the first-floor event space is able to hold small scale gatherings. Expanded work on the church-turned-museum-turned-visitor center is still two years off, but Ruffini said the downtown location of the property has already boosted engagement from the group's former site at the Eclipse Center.

With the opening of ABC Supply Stadium in August and a major step forward on the Ho-Chunk Nation’s Beloit casino-resort plan in March, Ruffini said the future is bright for Beloit.

“Everyone is excited for 2022,” he said.

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Austin Montgomery

