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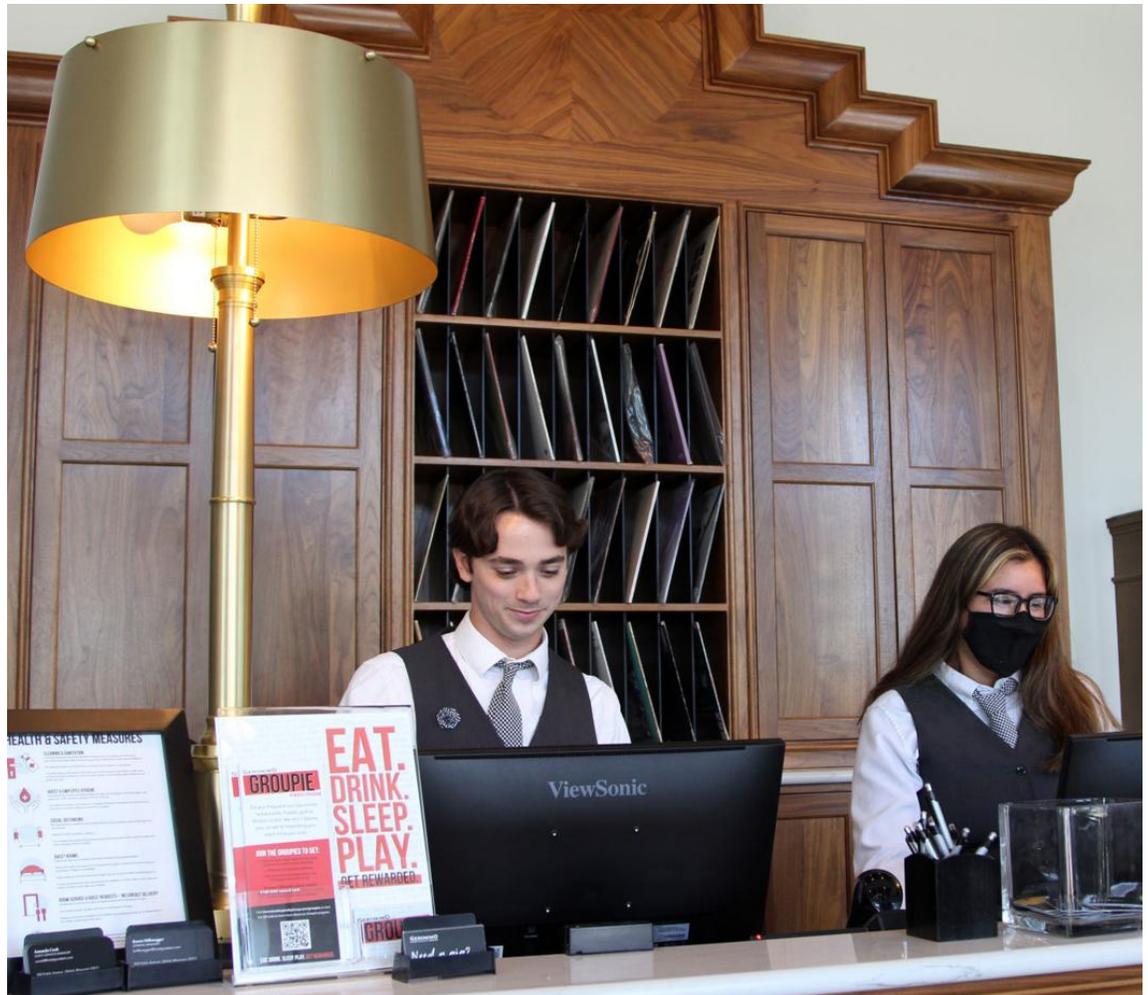
HOT

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Local tourism to Beloit picks up in 2021

By AUSTIN MONTGOMERY Staff Writer

Aug 12, 2021



From left: Hotel Goodwin front desk agents Cross Nelson and Anahi Guzman are pictured Thursday in downtown Beloit, Wis., where occupancy and increased revenue this year, tourism data compiled by Visit Beloit shows.

Austin Montgomery/Beloit Daily News

BELOIT — Beloit-area hotels are seeing a return to pre-pandemic revenue and guest numbers, as tourism officials say they are optimistic that visitors will continue to travel to the Stateline Area as the COVID-19 delta variant spread could force a backslide in traveler confidence.

Hotel revenue has returned to 2018 and 2019 levels, both of which were back-to-back record years for tourism in Beloit. From January to July 31, Beloit hotels generated \$7.5 million in revenue, which is up from \$7.1 million generated over the same time period in 2018 and about \$1.2 million off of 2019 levels, according to data tracked by Visit Beloit.

“Things have been moving in a positive direction,” said Visit Beloit Executive Director Celestino Ruffini. “The pandemic still looms in the background and we are cognizant that it could impact businesses quickly, but it appears the tourism economy is headed in the right direction.”

Overall hotel occupancy rates also are up around 20 to 27% this year compared to 2020, with hotels in Beloit seeing around 60% occupancy on weekdays and up to 90% on weekends since late June, Visit Beloit data shows. In the early months of the pandemic, hotel revenue was down about 60 percent and hotel occupancy was around 23%, according to Visit Beloit data from March to May 2020.

“A lot of that is pent up demand from people who have cancelled trips and business travel increasing,” Ruffini said. “Over the year we were seeing consumer confidence coming back.”

Ruffini said a telling sign of increased tourism activity is the number of events in the Beloit area. Last weekend, Visit Beloit tracked a total of 31 events in the Beloit area compared to 11 events over Memorial Day weekend.

Home2Suites by Hilton and Hampton Inn Beloit have seen a “tremendous rebound,” said Home2Suites General Manager Roy Ward.

“While we still aren’t completely back to pre-pandemic numbers, we are leaps and bounds ahead of last year. We have had multiple sold-out nights this summer,” Ward said. “Travelers seem happy to be out again and most seem very comfortable

traveling in the current climate. We're thrilled with where our business is and our attention is fully on what's ahead as opposed to looking back to last year. The future looks bright."

Stephanie Ashley-Hoppe, Geronimo Hospitality general manager at Beloit's Ironworks Hotel and Hotel Goodwin, said both leisure and business travel have been increasing in Beloit "in the last few months."

"We continue to see people looking for new places to explore and experience and Beloit has become more of a destination in the last 16 months than previous years," Ashley-Hoppe said. "We are optimistic that corporate travel will continue to increase and that the new markets of guests we have discovered will return again—keeping weekend and leisure occupancy high."

Both Ward and Ashley-Hoppe said staffing levels still had not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. Fewer people are also seeking hospitality jobs currently, Ward said.

"We are finding it difficult to fill job vacancies," Ward added. "We have had quite a bit of luck with referrals from our current employees and we are thankful for that because we have very few applications come into the hotel. We used to get at least 20 or more applications every month. Now I'd say we're lucky to receive five. We have increased our starting wages, but it's hard to hire someone who isn't applying."

But nationally, consumer confidence has fallen regarding travel as COVID-19 transmission fueled by the delta variant seems to be eroding gains made in the tourism industry in 2021.

Since June 8, travel optimism has fallen over 40 percentage points, reaching a year-to-date low of 20.4%. Instead, over half of American travelers now expect the pandemic to get worse in the United States over the next month. Americans feeling

pre-pandemic normalcy has tumbled another 7 percentage points to 25.3%, after reaching 42.7% a month ago, according to a study conducted by Destination Analysts, a market research firm focused on tourism.

“Nationally, the story is a bit different and people are still concerned about their health,” Ruffini said. “While the situation in Beloit continues to be optimistic, we are definitely on the edge of our seats watching everything.”

Austin Montgomery