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Tourism figures nearing pre-pandemic levels

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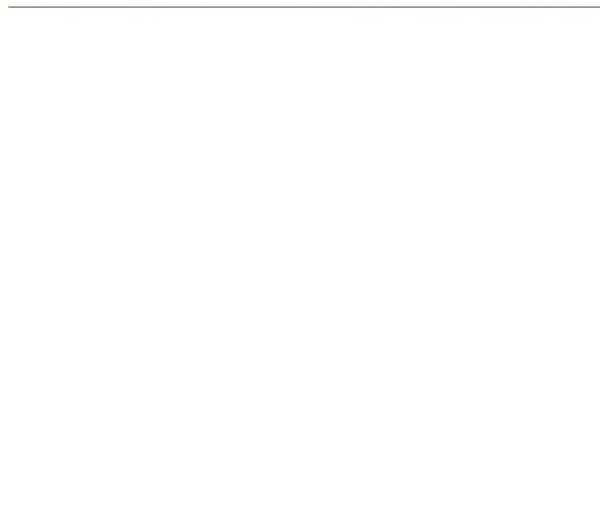
Visit Beloit CEO Celestino Ruffini stands next to the Wisconsin welcome sign along Interstate 39/90 in Beloit. The tourism industry is starting to rebound to pre-pandemic levels seen in 2019.

Austin Montgomery/Beloit Daily News

BELOIT—Tourism continues to rebound in Beloit and across Wisconsin as both local and statewide revenue tied to business and recreational travel begin to return to near pre-pandemic levels.



Since April of 2021, Beloit hotel occupancy has ranged between 12 to 27% above daily occupancy rates seen in 2020, according to data provided to Visit Beloit. From June to October of 2019, Beloit had an average daily hotel occupancy rate of 70.3%. In 2020 over that same time period, occupancy dropped to an average of 43% daily occupancy. This year, daily hotel occupancy figures have climbed back up to an average of 60% or an average of 462 rooms occupied on any given night in Beloit out of a hotel room stock of 767 rooms.



Daily hotel occupancy reached its lowest point in April of 2020 when hotels reported 22% daily occupancy, Visit Beloit tourism data shows.

Visit Beloit CEO Celestino Ruffini said 2019 is a “benchmark” used in the tourism industry to gauge how travel is rebounding after the height of the pandemic.

“We have well-exceeded where we were in the midst of the pandemic,” Ruffini said. “We are still closely watching where we are in comparison to 2019. We have some room to get where we were in 2019, but occupancy is rebounding with still a ways to go.”

Hotel revenue from July through September of this year all exceeded figures seen in 2019, which would make for three months of record-setting revenue generation, Ruffini said. Hotel revenue from July through September of this year was on average 7.6% higher than revenue seen in 2019, Visit Beloit data shows.

Prior to the pandemic, Beloit had seen 11 straight months of record hotel revenue from March of 2019 and February of 2020. Ruffini said it was important to note the opening of the Holiday Inn Express in the Milwaukee Road corridor to provide proper context to hotel figures as the hotel, which opened in early 2020, became the city's largest with 124 rooms.

“In general, we are definitely on the rebound. People are still spending money to stay here in Beloit,” Ruffini said.

Another strong sign of consumer confidence improving in the area is Rock County reporting record sales tax revenue generation for three consecutive quarters of this year, with the first quarter of 2021 nearing \$4 million; and both the second and third quarters surpassing \$4.5 million in sales tax revenue, per data provided by the Rock County Development Alliance.

In Wisconsin, travel spending data for September of this year shows the state's first growth in monthly year-over-year tourism spending compared to 2019 even as the national average continues to lag at a 9% drop. Wisconsin was one of only 13 states to post positive growth over 2019, according to the United States Travel Association's monthly tourism spending data.

“The tourism industry is an essential part of our state and our economy,” said Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers. “We've put more than \$200 million in federal recovery funds toward helping our tourism and hospitality industries get through this pandemic and bounce back, and I'm proud of our work to help support our economic recovery.”

Both Illinois and Minnesota lagged the national average at 21% and 20% spending declines, while Iowa and Michigan exceeded the national average, losing 5% and 3% traveler spending compared to 2019. Wisconsin at 1% growth was the only state in the Midwest competitive set to exceed spending for any month compared to 2019 since the beginning of the pandemic., the report shows.

In 2020, Wisconsin tourism's \$17.3 billion industry saw a 22% decline compared to 2019, the state's best year on record. The Wisconsin Department of Tourism anticipates 2021 to still be down compared to 2019; the shift to increased spending is another indicator of the state's steady recovery.

"We expect to see more bumps in the long road to recovery, but we are on the right path and we want to celebrate this moment for the tourism industry workers whose livelihoods depend on this rebound," said Tourism Secretary-designee Anne Sayers. "While meetings and conventions and other large group gatherings are slow to return, leisure travelers are making up for it by spending their time and their dollars in Wisconsin to experience the unexpected and when that happens, Wisconsin wins."

A report published on Oct. 31 by Destination Analysts, a market research firm aimed at tracking the tourism industry in the U.S., found that Americans across the country are beginning to become more confident in travel following the surge of the COVID-19 delta variant at the mid-part of this year.

In the report, 83.8% of respondents said they currently have travel plans, with 53% traveling at least once in the next three months and 52.5% of travelers saying they would prioritize travel in their budgets.

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