

Tourists coming here, with money

July 9, 2008 By [CINDY WOJDYLA CAIN](#) CCAIN@SCN1.COM

The economic impact of tourism spending in Will County increased 9.4 percent last year, according to figures released Tuesday by the state.

"We continue to surge because we have so many great attractions," said Ben Benson, director of the Joliet Visitors Bureau.

Kendall County's tourism spending impact increased 11.2 percent to \$34.1 million, the biggest increase among 10 northeastern Illinois counties. Will County's 9.4 percent increase was second, which brought the total economic impact in the county to \$585 million. Grundy County increased 2.9 percent to \$49.9 million.

Benson attributed the area's rising numbers to some staple attractions -- the city's two casinos and Chicagoland Speedway -- and something new, the Route 66 Visitors Bureau.

"These types of things, they're not going to go away," Benson said.

Adding events

Route 66, in particular, is gaining in popularity now that there is an official starting point to reconnect with the road, he said. The site, which was created through a state grant and opened last year, has attracted "a ton" of international visitors, Benson said.

"We've had groups of Germans and a lot of Ukrainians visit," he said. "It's amazing. They call and ask about Route 66, and they ask how to (tour) it."

Benson also cited the Illinois High School Association baseball finals, the downtown fine arts fest and the Taste of Joliet as attractions that are relatively new or returning to the tourism scene here.

"We haven't lost events," Benson said. "We continue to add events. Not a lot of communities can say that."

Boon for state

The 10 northeastern counties cited by the state generated \$23 billion in local economic impact, according to the release from the governor's office. The figures were compiled by the Travel Association of America.

Statewide, tourism was up 5.8 percent or \$1.6 billion last year for a total economic impact of \$29.9 billion.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich said Tuesday the statistics show the state's tourism industry is thriving.

"Visitors are pumping millions of dollars into the Illinois economy and are helping to create good jobs for the hard-working people of our state," he said.

According to the state, visitors spent nearly \$82 million in Illinois businesses every day last year.

Domestic travel expenditures were \$28.9 billion, a 5.2 percent increase, compared to \$1.9 billion from international expenditures a 15.6 percent increase.

Tallying travelers

Other statistics in the report:

- Travel-generated jobs increased by 3,940 in 2007 to 305,460.
- State and local tax revenues grew by 5.5 percent, generating over \$2 billion from travel spending.
- Leisure travel in Illinois increased 3.5 percent over the past two years, outpacing the national growth rate of 1.8 percent.
- Business travel in the state increased 6.7 percent in 2007.
- Illinois is tied for sixth among the most popular states for overseas travelers, hosting 1,171,000 overseas visitors, an 8 percent increase over the previous year.