

By Jeff Engelhardt - jengelhardt@shawmedia.com

DeKalb County looks to expand tourism after recent success

SYCAMORE – Coming off the recent major movie and TV filming in DeKalb County, officials are looking for ways to expand services in the tourism and art departments.

Members of the county board's Economic Development Committee discussed the possibility of starting a countywide art council as well as allocating \$10,000 to the DeKalb Area Convention and Visitors Bureau so it could obtain a matching grant of \$56,000 from the state.

The county had previously allocated only \$13,000 to the bureau in the past three years combined, but committee chairwoman Patricia Vary, D-DeKalb, said the return on investment shows the county should continue to grow tourism services. The visitors bureau received only \$3,000 from the county last year, but has created more than \$750,000 in revenue for the DeKalb area as a result of the Dennis Quaid movie filming in the area. The total amount will be even more as the production crew isn't scheduled to leave until the end of October.

"We as a committee are going to try to increase support," Vary said. "[The bureau] brought in \$750,000 when we only gave \$3,000 ... so it's an area we need to look to grow."

The bureau already has \$46,000 for the next budget year from DeKalb and Sycamore governments. A \$10,000 allocation from the county board would give the organization the \$56,000 needed to get the \$56,000 match from the state. It would be the first state grant the bureau has received as it just recently became a state-certified tourism bureau.

Committee member Jeff Metzger Sr., R-Sandwich, said with the economy still struggling the county needs to invest wisely and watch every dollar, but the tourism sector has proven it deserves a larger budget when many are being cut. The most recent report from the organization showed every dollar invested equals a roughly \$8 to \$9 return.

"In this day and age, that's tough to beat," Metzger said.

The county isn't interested in just bringing in films and arts, it also wants to support what already exists. Vary said she was surprised by the amount of art organizations spread throughout the county and the committee has been discussing a way to make it easier for them to collaborate.

The committee hopes to start an art council that will allow organizations to come together to advertise events in advance, have a central location to sell tickets for events and possibly pull funds together to purchase or lease space for costumes, sets, lighting and other supplies.

Committee member Robert Brown, D-DeKalb, said he could see the county allocating some seed money to help start the council, but it would probably have to be self-sustained.

"I'm just very excited with what's happening in tourism and the arts and I believe it has a chance to really grow," Brown said

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