



Sauk Valley Area  
chamber of commerce

UNITED STATES CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

**ACCREDITED**



**IN THIS  
ISSUE:**



**PAGE 5**



**PAGE 7**



**PAGE 8**

# Partnering for Success

FEBRUARY 2024




## JOIN US FOR **BUSINESS AFTER HOURS**

**Thursday, February 15**  
5:00 - 6:30 p.m.

**Whiteside County Senior Center**  
1207 W. 9th St., STERLING


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DRINKS, DOOR  
PRIZES & MORE!**



Sauk's Chocolate  
*Rendezvous*

**SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 17**  
**SVCC.EDU/CHOCOLATE**

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OnCall Imaging  
Preston-Shilling Funeral Home  
Quatford  
Roper  
Rock River/Troy Lumber  
Sauk Valley Medical  
Sterling Federal Bank  
Tobacco Cash  
WVFLU

## February Meetings

- February 1 Exec
- February 8 Ambassadors
- February 13 Board of Directors
- February 13 Education
- February 13 Golf
- February 15 HBLC
- February 20 Ag

### Sauk Valley Area Chamber of Commerce Directors & Staff

#### Executive Committee

- President: Pam Fluck
- First Vice President: Geoff Wright
- Second Vice President: Alejandro Rivera
- Treasurer: Tim Determan
- Past President: Dr. Jon Mandrell

#### Term Ends January 31, 2025

- Alejandro Rivera, RE/MAX Sauk Valley
- Geoff Wright, CGH Medical Center
- Josh Johnson, Whiteside Area Career Center
- Dr. Jon Mandrell, SVCC
- Rebecca Munoz-Ripley, YWCA

#### Term Ends January 31, 2026

- Pam Fluck, Self Help Enterprises
- Sandi Cavazos, US Bank
- Katie Whitehead, HALO Branded Solutions
- Kristina Kaecker, Kunes RV

#### Term Ends January 31, 2027

- Tim Determan, Pinney Printing
- Lance Buser, Wal-Mart DC #7024
- Ryan Olson, Ward Murray Pace & Johnson
- Bailey Schneiderbauer, Sauk Valley Bank
- Mike Ceruzzi, Moore Tire
- Josh Knie, Knie Appliance & TV

#### Staff

- Executive Director—Kris Noble
- Marketing Coordinator — Dallas Knack
- Office Manager/Financial Specialist—Janie Fisher

The views expressed by any member of the Chamber do not represent the Sauk Valley Area Chamber of Commerce in any official endorsement or support of any specific elected official or political party. Any products, events, statements, views or opinions offered or expressed by members are not the products, events, statements, views or opinions of the SVACC, nor endorsed by the Chamber or its membership at large.

## A Message from the Director

In January, the SVACC hosted our Annual Meeting & Dinner at the McCormick Event Center in Rock Falls. It was an incredible evening and I left that event filled with so much gratitude. As I stood before our members - 290 guests - and looked around the room, I was filled with such gratitude, hope, and excitement. In any community, there will always be challenges, but this event reminded me that the Sauk Valley will preserve and thrive because of our members who are invested in this community, and their commitment to supporting local businesses, getting involved in the community, and taking action.

I want to thank Dave Knie and Steve Munson. Both have served on the SVACC board since 2015 when I started my chamber journey as the Executive Director. I want to thank them for their patience and support, for challenging me to continue to think about how to best represent the business community, for sharing their knowledge about small business, and always being a champion for the chamber. It was an honor to have you as board members.

This month we welcome three new incoming board members. I am excited about their role with the SVACC and for what the future holds.



(left to right)

- Mike Ceruzzi - Moore Tires
- Bailey Schneiderbauer – Sauk Valley Bank
- Josh Knie - Knie Appliance

Lastly, Congratulations to Deb Mortonson, the 2023 SVACC Chamber Champion. You are truly a change agent for the Sauk Valley!

During the Annual Dinner we shared our 2023 report. In case you missed it, you can click [here](#) to view the annual report.

# Investor Update February

## NEW MEMBERS

A Cut Above  
705 E. 3rd St., Sterling  
815-564-7404

The Radar Free Press LLC  
117 W. 2nd St., Rock Falls  
815-200-6404

Momentum ABA Services  
920 W. Prairie Dr., Sycamore  
630-536-7912

Gripp Custom Inc.  
401 W. Main St., Wyand  
815-915-1612

Viva Performing Arts, Inc  
113 1st St., Dixon  
815-677-5240

AquaTec Aquarium Solutions  
705 E. 3rd St., Sterling  
815-622-8759

## INVESTOR RENEWALS

1st Gateway Credit Union  
BEST, Inc.  
Campos Construction Inc  
Culligan Water Conditioning  
Folsom's Bakery, Inc.  
Holiday Inn Express & Suites  
Imprintable Memories  
LK Design Source  
McDonald Funeral Home & Crematory  
Moments Leadership  
Pizza Ranch  
ReadyNation Illinois

Re/Max Sauk Valley  
Russ & Carol Siefken  
Select Employee Credit Union  
Shay Brown State Farm Insurance  
Sterling Main Street  
The Fitting Room  
The IFH Group  
Thompson Truck & Trailer  
Trinity Insurance & Financial Services  
Whiteside Area Career Center  
Whiteside County Senior Center

We would like to give special recognition to the following groups who provide extra support to the Sauk Valley Area Chamber of Commerce. This extra effort and support is truly appreciated. If you have the opportunity to express your sincere appreciation to these members, please do so!

### Over \$1000 Invested

Central Bank Illinois  
CGH Medical Center  
Community State Bank  
Etnyre & Co.  
Farmers National Bank - Morrison  
Midland States Bank  
Sauk Valley Bank  
Select Employees Credit Union  
Sterling Federal Bank  
US Bank  
Wahl Clipper Corp.  
Wal-Mart DC #7024  
Ward, Murray, Pace & Johnson

### 150% Club

Altran Magnetics  
Bushel Basket Candle Co.  
Candlelight Inn  
Helm Civil  
Hill's Electric Motor Service, Inc.  
Illinois American Water  
Lance's Plumbing  
LK Design Source  
Loescher HVAC  
Lutheran Social Services of IL  
Mattox Insurance Agency  
McDonald's

Moore Monument & Granite Co  
NICIL  
PC Tech 2U  
RE/MAX Sauk Valley  
Rise Broadband  
Rock River Hospice & Home  
Select Employee Credit Union  
Sterling Commercial Roofing  
Sterling Rock Falls Child Care  
Sterling Township  
Surf Internet  
United Craftsmen, Ltd.

### 110% Club

1st Gateway Credit Union  
Astec Mobile Screens Inc  
Bardier & Ramirez Real Estate  
Bollman Auto Center  
Compeer Financial  
Dennis Electric of Tampico  
Hawkins-Cassens Insurance

Hill Fastener  
Imprintable Memories  
James S. Ferris DDS, PC  
Kelly's Restaurant  
Kiwanis Club of Sterling  
Marv Lofgren & Sons  
Contractors  
McCormick's Nursey

Mertes & Mertes  
NAMI Sauk Area  
New Millenium Directories  
Rock River Lumber & Grain  
Rock River Ready Mix  
Scholl Insurance Agency  
Servicemaster  
ServPro of Sterling

Showplace Antiques  
St. Vincent DePaul  
Sterling Chevrolet  
The Factory  
Trinity Insurance  
Winter Construction

## Chamber Ambassadors

Allie Johnston – University of Illinois Extension

Arnulfo Valdivia—Sauk Valley Bank

Brian Hawkins—Brian Hawkins Insurance

Cael Sanders—Sterling Federal Bank

Cassandra Salmon – OnCall Imaging

Chandra Meyer – Re/Max Sauk Valley

Christina Bystry – House in the Country

Jennifer Alvarez – Surf Internet

Karen Voss – Morningside of Sterling

Mary White – Community State Bank

Pam Fluck – Self Help Enterprises

Rene Betts – Plotner Insurance Consultants

Sami Wiggins – Allure Health Care

Sherry DeWalt – CGH Health Foundation

Skip Dettman—LSSI

Stepheni Chandler—Hughes Resources

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### Brian Hawkins—Brian Hawkins Insurance, The Cornerstone Agency

Hello, my name is Brian Hawkins and I am an insurance agent with Brian Hawkins Insurance, The Cornerstone Agency Inc. I have been involved with the Chamber since 2011, serving on the board of directors, executive board, and board president. I have continued to be involved with the Chamber since my time on the board was over and recently officially became an ambassador. Being a part of the SVACC has been one of the best investments of my time in terms of getting to know the people and businesses of the Sauk Valley. The SVACC is a great organization and I enjoy doing my part to help with all the good that it does for our community.



As an independent insurance agent, I work with multiple companies to help assist with your personal, business, life, and farm insurance needs. I was born and raised in the Sauk Valley area and am starting my 20<sup>th</sup> year in our community as an insurance professional. I am proud to be a part of a locally owned insurance agency and look forward to helping you with your insurance needs going forward.

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### Cassandra Salmon—OnCall Imaging

Hello Chamber Members, and Happy New Year! Some of you may recall me from Sauk Valley Bank or maybe YWCA of the Sauk Valley, but if you're new here, then please, let me introduce myself. My name is Cassandra, and I've been an ambassador for 8 years. I have to say that I think we are incredibly lucky to have Kris, the staff, and the SVACC here in our community. The Chamber has given me all the opportunities to meet new people, learn about and support our community, and promote local businesses and/or activities to my colleagues and friends. I spent 12 years of my career in banking before choosing to move on to explore other skills and talents. Making connections and helping people have always been a main driver in my idea of success. Now, you'll find me promoting Affordable, Convenient, and Quality Imaging Services for our community at OnCall Imaging in Rock Falls, IL. As the Business Development Specialist, I'm excited to share all the ways we can support the community, and partner with local healthcare providers for the best patient experience possible. OnCall Imaging is an independent diagnostic testing center offering MRI, CT, Ultrasound, X-Ray, Mammography, and DEXA. We have a beautiful spa-like center with immediate appointments and knowledgeable, experienced technologist waiting to give you one-on-one patient care. Stop by and see me- I'd love to show you around!



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### Chandra Meyer-Howard—RE/MAX Sauk Valley

Chandra Meyer-Howard is a Realtor with RE/MAX Sauk Valley in Sterling. Chandra was born and raised in Sterling, Graduated from Newman CC High School, and attending Carthage College where she obtained bachelor's degrees in business administration and marketing. She discovered her passion for real estate at a young age and has spent the past 8 years immersed in all things real estate in the Sauk Valley area. She's proud to serve as Co-Chair of the Chamber Ambassadors and really enjoys being active in our community.



## Annual Meeting & Dinner

Thank you to everyone who attended our Annual Meeting & Dinner. We appreciate the opportunity to celebrate our organization and you - our wonderful members! The evening was a great success thanks to our awesome hosts, the WACC CEO Program. Thank you to Walmart DC #7024, Selmi's Weddings and Events, and McCormick Event Center for supporting the CEO Program and our event.

We were proud to honor our 2023 Chamber Champion Award Recipient: Deb Mortonson!

The SVACC Chamber Champion Award was awarded to Deb Mortonson for her community involvement and generosity. Deb is an educator by trade, teaching many classes at the Sterling-Rock Falls YMCA including swimming lessons, babysitting classes, CPR and first aid, and lifeguard classes. Additionally, she volunteers at local events such as Seasonal Sights and Sounds, Summer Splash, and Hometown Holidays. Deb is generous with her time, spending hours making our community a better place. She can often be found volunteering with United Way at their Feed the Children program, and raising funds for the organization. Most recently, Deb donated an outdoor basketball court and additional hoops to the YMCA to expand the basketball program and offer tournaments for local players.



Congratulations to Christina Bystry, the recipient of the LaVonne Colloton Ambassador of the Year Award! Christina was recognized for her service and commitment to the SVACC through her role as Ambassador co-chair, attendance at ribbon cuttings and Customer Service Award presentations, and outreach to members celebrating anniversaries with the SVACC.

We would like to recognize our outgoing Board President, Dr. Jon Mandrell and outgoing board members Dave Knie and Steve Munson for their dedication to the Chamber.



The SVACC Ambassadors made contributions to NAMI and Illinois 22 Mohawks to support their work. We thank them for their commitment to improving the lives of others.



## Member Spotlight



The Autism Center of Sauk Valley opened its doors in April 2023 to fill a need in our community. Founded and owned by a Sauk Valley native, BCBA, and autism mom, the Autism Center of Sauk Valley provides focused and comprehensive ABA therapy to children and young adults in their own home and at the clinic by the Dixon Culver's.



ABA therapy is recognized by the US Surgeon General as the standard of care for autism spectrum disorder. It teaches everything from communication skills to social skills to daily living skills. Whether working on potty training or building relationships with peers, the Autism Center provides treatment that is fun, engaging, and involves the whole family. Families are heavily involved in the treatment planning process and have regular meetings with their BCBA throughout treatment to generalize skills beyond the therapeutic setting, whether to school, grandma's house, or Walmart. As one of the only ABA clinics in the state that accepts IL Medicaid, the Autism Center of Sauk Valley strives to provide high-quality, compassionate care that is accessible and empowers children to meet new heights.

## Sauk Valley Community Leadership Program



The SVCLP cohort had a great morning of learning with the WACC CEO classes in December. The guests for the day were state and local government representatives and included the following: Mary Oros, Dixon City Council; Chris Bishop, Dixon City Council and candidate for Illinois State Senate 37th District; Kaitlyn Ekquist, Sterling City Council; Bob Olson, Chairman of Lee County Board; Tom Kitson, Vice Chairman of Lee County Board; and Bradley Fritts, IL State Representative for the 74th District.

The cohort also participated in a "Favorite Things Swap" and learned more about each other's hobbies and talents. Leo's Marvelous Bites of Dixon, operated by SVCLP alum Violet Nava-Solis, prepared a delicious lunch.



Dr. Sara Dail, Sterling Public Schools Assistant Superintendent, spent the morning of January 17, 2024, with the SVCLP cohort at the Walmart Distribution Center #7024. Dail's interactive "Difficult Conversations" presentation created thoughtful sharing and discussion. We then toured the incredible Walmart facility. Finally, a panel of human resource experts shared their leadership journeys, answered our burning questions, and gave us great advice. The panel was so riveting, the facilitator forgot to take pictures! Thank you to Sandy Baylor-Schmidt, CGH Medical Center; Robert Urbanski, FRANTZ Manufacturing Company; Sara Dail, Sterling Public Schools; and Joanna Thiede, Walmart Distribution Center #7024. Lunch from Arthur's Garden Deli rounded out a day of excellence.

The SVACC Agribusiness Committee presented a contribution to Oregon Community Unit School District FFA Program as part of their dedication to supporting local ag education.



## Workforce Development

*Written by Jobs for the Future*



**JFF**

### What Are Skills-Based Talent Practices?

By “skills-based talent practices,” we mean organizing all talent acquisition and talent development activities around objectively defined skills. This is a departure from the widespread reliance on proxy signals of skills, such as four-year college degree requirements, specific numbers of years of experience, or a limited set of job titles in a candidate’s career history.

Examples of skills-based talent practices include:

- Rewriting job descriptions to focus on required skills and eliminating unnecessary degree requirements
- Partnering with local community colleges or training programs to access new employees who have completed specific types of training
- Requiring managers to consider internal talent for new roles before posting jobs externally
- Providing managers and employees with information about possible career paths, the skills those paths require, and resources to develop those skills

Companies that focus on employee skills can reward individuals based on their abilities and then help them develop additional skills to transition into new roles that match the individuals’ capabilities. This shift benefits both employees and employers: Employees gain access to new opportunities and career trajectories, while employers meet specific business requirements, develop essential skills for future demands, and boost retention rates.

View the full publication [here](#).

### Skills-based talent practices:

- Save businesses **70-92%** per employee when used to build emerging skills rather than hiring new talent.
- Allow employers to access larger talent pools, both inside and outside of their companies.
- Enable employers to efficiently match business needs with required talent.
- Accelerate existing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives by enabling employers to access untapped talent that has faced bias and other barriers to economic advancement.
- Help employers make more precise staffing decisions.
- Reduce harmful biases in application and interview processes.
- Increase worker satisfaction.
- Honor workers’ voice and choice in lifelong learning by allowing workers to build skills that drive career advancement.

**Congratulations to  
Arthur's Garden Deli—Sterling  
for receiving the  
Customer Service Award!**

Arthur's was nominated for their quick service, great food, and friendly staff. Their nominator said "[we] seem to take for granted what a gem this place is!"

Pay them a visit at 2312 E Lincolnway, Sterling.



CSA Sponsored by:



## Government Affairs



### Ready Nation provides information on the Child Tax Credit

Congress may soon take action to enhance the Child Tax Credit (CTC), which is a proven tool to help lift children out of poverty. Should you choose, you have an opportunity to lend your important voices in support of this effort and to encourage Congress to pass the bipartisan proposal.

[Here is a summary of the bill.](#)

*Please note: This is a federal-level request on behalf of the ReadyNation National Team and our Federal Policy Team. This request is separate from ongoing state-level efforts around child tax credits that some members are working on in close coordination with their ReadyNation state leads.*

The CTC is a tax credit for working parents with dependent children, currently providing \$2,000 in tax relief per qualifying child, and up to \$1,600 of that is refundable, known as the Additional Child Tax Credit (ACTC). Congress is currently considering a bipartisan bill, led by Representative Jason Smith (R-MO) and Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR), that would enhance the ACTC over the next three years, raising the maximum refundable credit to \$2,000 per child by 2025.

For example, a family earning \$13,000 annually with two children would now receive a refundable credit of \$1,575 per child, rather than a total of \$1,575. The proposal would benefit nearly 15 million children whose parents do not currently receive the full benefit and could raise over 400,000 children out of poverty in the first year.

To contact your Representative or Senator, please visit [this website](#) where you can input your address and be directly linked to information on how to email or call their office.



## Guest Editorial

Written by Matthew Lenox, VisitNW



### **The Economic Impact of Tourism in Northwest Illinois: A Strategic Perspective for Business Growth**

In the evolving economic landscape of Northwest Illinois, tourism has emerged as a pivotal sector, driving not just foot traffic but substantial economic opportunity. This editorial delves into the nuanced interplay between tourism and local business development, exploring tourism's profound, often underappreciated, economic impacts. As businesses in our region navigate post-pandemic recovery and new market dynamics, understanding these interactions is no longer optional but essential for sustained growth.

**The Economic Ripple Effect of Tourism in Northwest Illinois:** Tourism in Northwest Illinois plays a crucial role in the broader economic narrative of the state. In 2022, Illinois celebrated a banner year, with the state's hotel revenue hitting the highest on record at \$308 million and visitor spending soaring to \$44 billion, just shy of the pre-pandemic peak. This statewide success story is mirrored in the diverse experiences of the counties in Northwest Illinois, where the impact of tourism is both significant and multifaceted.

Ogle County exemplifies the region's potential, boasting a 25.3% surge in visitor spending, reaching \$98.1 million. This impressive growth indicates the county's ability to attract tourists and the resulting boon to its local economy. Lee County follows suit with a 13.0% increase in tourism revenue, amounting to \$40.0 million, signaling a healthy uptick in its tourism sector.

Whiteside County also demonstrated economic resilience with a 6.7% growth in visitor spending, culminating in \$57.1 million. These positive trends reflect a region capitalizing on its appeal to visitors, from scenic byways to historic sites and local festivals. The increases in these counties reflect the statewide trend, where tourism's overall economic impact in 2022 amounted to a staggering \$78 billion, bolstering various sectors of the state's economy and supporting 270,600 jobs in the tourism and hospitality industry.

Carroll County experienced a modest decrease of -1.3% in visitor spending, totaling \$32.2 million. However, when we look at the trend over time, Carroll County has seen an explosion of activity since the pandemic (In 2019, Visitor spending was at \$28.7 million. This indicates that authentic experiences, outdoor activities, and historic and scenic sights significantly appeal to our region.

Together, these figures highlight the importance of tourism in Northwest Illinois and emphasize the sector's role in driving the state's economic engine. The data suggests a vibrant tourism industry with room for strategic growth, especially as the state continues to invest in marketing and infrastructure development to bolster the industry further.

### **Emerging Trends and Opportunities in Northwest Illinois Tourism:**

As tourism rebounds in Illinois, one trend stands out for its growth and potential: outdoor recreation. The post-pandemic era has seen a surge in interest in outdoor activities as visitors seek experiences that combine adventure, nature, and wellness. This shift presents a significant opportunity for Northwest Illinois, a region blessed with natural beauty and diverse outdoor attractions.

In recent years, hiking, biking, fishing, and camping trends have gained popularity. The development of trails, conservation of natural parks, and promotion of outdoor festivals have further fueled this interest. Local businesses can capitalize on this trend by offering related products and services, such as outdoor gear rentals, guided tours, and eco-friendly accommodations.

## CEO Program

**Written by: Olivia Purvis—Prophetstown High School**

“When you own your own business, you have to actually be good at the things you say you are.”

That is something that we heard recently in CEO from Liandro Arellano. I believe that this is something that we have learned to be true in CEO as well. As high school students, we don't do many things independently, which means that we don't often get opportunities to use skills like communication, time management, organization, or even leadership. However, in CEO, we have the opportunity to use these skills everyday. Before taking CEO, I probably would've said that I was pretty good at all of these things. However, it didn't take long for me to realize that I didn't really have these skills, I'd just always had someone there to keep me on track. For example, I didn't have good time management skills, I just had someone else to make sure I was where I needed to be when I needed to be there. I think that this has been especially apparent in the process of planning and executing our class business. We know how easy it is to say that we can do something, but we have just realized that actually following through is much more difficult. This being said, CEO has been an amazing opportunity to improve these skills while still in high school, giving CEO students a head start as we soon venture out on our own.



**Written by: Avery Olinger—Prophetstown High School**

“Do things that make you massively uncomfortable” -Jamie Leech

This quote is one of many through CEO that has changed my life over the past few months. I have always tried to stay in my comfort zone and do what's easy for me. Whenever I faced challenges I would take the easy way out. Why would I put myself in an uncomfortable position if I didn't have to? The thing is the only way to grow is to say yes to the challenges and make yourself uncomfortable.



Ever since I joined CEO it has changed my way of thinking. I have stopped taking the easy way out of situations and have tried new things. A couple months ago my NHS teacher asked for volunteers to give speeches at the induction ceremony. Instantly I avoided eye contact and tried to hide so she wouldn't ask me to do a speech but then I got to thinking about what Jamie Leech said. She explained how growth would come from making yourself uncomfortable and doing things you would never want to do. I then raised my hand and volunteered myself to read the speech. I would NEVER want to publicly speak but I knew that if I did, it would only get easier from there. Once it came time for me to do the speech I got very nervous and most definitely regretted my decision but looking back now I am very grateful that I put myself into that situation. Although my speech wasn't the best, I learned a lot from the experience and hope to keep pushing myself to become a better public speaker.

Without this class I would have never realized how important it is to try new things no matter how scary it might be. Even if it's something as little as going up to someone and introducing myself, that I could easily avoid, I now take these opportunities so I can become not only a better business worker but a better person overall. I am very grateful for all the lessons CEO has taught me already. I have implemented so many things into my everyday life from this class and I will continue to do so for the rest of my life.

**Written by: Makaylee Pipes—Sterling High School**

Being in the CEO program is unlike anything I have ever experienced in my life. It has pushed me to my limits and has completely broken me out of my shell; I am so glad I took this class. On a daily basis we either have class days where we work on upcoming events or we have speakers. And in this class I have learned that failure is a crucial key in success. I was afraid of failure before I took this class but now I welcome it; it is proof that I am putting in effort and working towards my goals.

This class has taught me many valuable things including recognizing my own strengths and weaknesses; and by doing so I can improve my weaknesses and better my strengths. I would 100% recommend this class to everyone. I've learned that some of my strengths are networking, marketing, and organization. By stepping out in taking this class, I stepped out of my comfort zone... and I can say it has changed me for the better. I cannot wait to see where this class takes me in the end.



(continued)



Another growing segment within outdoor tourism is agritourism. Visitors are increasingly drawn to experiences that connect them with rural life, local agriculture, and farm-to-table dining. This trend aligns well with the agricultural heritage of Northwest Illinois, offering an authentic and educational perspective on rural living.

Additionally, the rise of digital nomadism has led to a demand for destinations that offer both natural beauty and connectivity. Creating spaces where visitors can enjoy outdoor activities while staying connected for work can attract this new breed of travelers.

By tapping into these trends, businesses in Northwest Illinois can attract a diverse range of tourists, from adventure seekers to nature lovers and remote workers, further bolstering the region's tourism sector.

#### Strategic Recommendations for Local Businesses:

1. **Develop Partnerships with Local Attractions:** Small businesses can collaborate with local parks, trails, and conservation areas to offer packages or discounts to visitors. This creates a mutually beneficial relationship that enhances the overall tourist experience.
2. **Offer Outdoor-Friendly Services and Products:** Adapt your product line or services to cater to outdoor enthusiasts. This could include offering rental equipment for outdoor activities, selling locally sourced products, or providing guides and maps for local trails and natural sites.
3. **Embrace Agritourism Opportunities:** For businesses in rural areas, agritourism presents a unique opportunity. Consider offering farm tours, hosting farm-to-table events, or selling artisanal and locally produced goods to tourists interested in the region's agricultural heritage.
4. **Leverage Digital Marketing:** Utilize social media and digital marketing to reach tourists. Highlighting your business's involvement in outdoor tourism and local attractions can attract visitors planning their trip.
5. **Create Remote-Worker Friendly Spaces:** With the rise of digital nomadism, businesses like cafes and B&Bs can attract remote workers by offering reliable Wi-Fi, comfortable workspaces, and extended stay discounts.
6. **Host or Participate in Local Events:** Engage with the community by hosting or participating in local events and festivals, especially those celebrating the outdoors and local culture. This increases visibility and attracts both locals and tourists.
7. **Sustainability Practices:** Emphasize eco-friendly and sustainable practices in your operations. This appeals to a growing segment of environmentally conscious travelers and contributes to preserving the region's natural beauty.

The tourism sector's recovery and growth in Illinois, particularly following the challenges of the pandemic, underscore its critical role in the economic fabric of Northwest Illinois. By embracing tourism as a key economic driver and adapting strategically, local businesses can tap into this potent source of growth, ensuring a prosperous future for the region.

I invite individuals and businesses interested in collaborating and exploring opportunities in the tourism sector to contact me. Together, we can create innovative partnerships and initiatives that contribute to the ongoing success of Northwest Illinois. Let's work together to harness the full potential of our region's tourism industry and shape a vibrant future for our communities. Feel free to contact me to discuss collaboration possibilities.

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Matthew Lenox is the Executive Director of VisitNW Illinois (formerly Blackhawk Waterways CVB). He services Carroll, Lee, Whiteside, and Ogle counties.

# SHOPPES AT GRANDON PLAZA

retail incubator space

Applications are now open for the 2024 season!



## RUNNING A BUSINESS IS A BIG VENTURE AND WE WANT YOU TO SUCCEED!

The Shoppes at Grandon Plaza was designed to attract small businesses, create more retail shopping options, and bring people to downtown Sterling. These units allow business owners to try out a new idea, get a feel for the Sterling market, and grow your business.

Spaces are available on an 8-month contract for May through December 2024.



SCAN FOR APPLICATION

**QUESTIONS?  
CALL 815-626-8610**

Shoppes at Grandon Plaza  
310 2nd Avenue, Sterling, IL  
[sterlingmainstreet.org/shoppes-at-grandon-plaza](http://sterlingmainstreet.org/shoppes-at-grandon-plaza)