

Visit
Chicago



*Southland*SM

Just Beyond the City Limits



Annual Report
Fiscal Year 2024



Statement of Purpose

Visit Chicago Southland enhances the Region's Quality of Life by attracting visitor spending that powers job creation, the generation of non-resident taxes and the development of new hospitality amenities.

Vision Statement

The Chicago Southland will be recognized as the most excitingly diverse, accessible, inclusive and safe region in all of the Chicago area.

Mission Statement

Visit Chicago Southland promotes the region's communities as an exceptional destination for meetings, events and leisure pursuits while advocating for the development of outstanding inclusive experiences that attract visitors and residents alike.

Our History

Visit Chicago Southland was founded over 37 years ago as a subsidiary of the Regional Economic Development Coordinating Corporation. In 1993, VCS separated from its parent organization, servicemarked the name and became an independent 501(c)(6) organization. As a regional cooperative, Visit Chicago Southland represents the south and southwest communities approximately 25 miles south of downtown Chicago.

2023-2025 Strategic Plan

Adopted in FY23, VCS's Three-Year Strategic Plan is the guiding document as Visit Chicago Southland and the local hospitality region take the next steps in destination marketing and development.

Goals

1. Advocate for Destination Enhancing Development
2. Support Initiatives to Elevate the Destination Experience
3. Continue to Increase the Ability for Visit Chicago Southland to Positively Impact the Region

To Our Valued Partners

In a world where change is the only constant, we find ourselves embracing transformation with renewed energy and optimism. As Winston Churchill wisely noted, “to improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often.” This year, Visit Chicago Southland experienced significant evolution, marking the beginning of a new chapter with a change in leadership for the first time in 28 years.

With this shift, our commitment to excellence remains unwavering. We’ve embarked on a series of bold initiatives aimed at enhancing our brand and engaging our audience in innovative ways. From our fresh rebranding effort—introducing our new name and dynamic motto, “Where Boring Doesn’t Exist”—to the integration of an advanced AI search engine on VisitChicagoSouthland.com, we are setting new standards for how we connect with our community and visitors.

This year has also seen the debut of our annual hospitality showcase, launched in celebration of National Tourism Day, and the roll-out of fresh marketing campaigns designed to captivate and inspire. We’re particularly proud of our new, tech-savvy Visit Information Center at the Chicago Southland Lincoln Oasis, which is poised to enhance the visitor experience.

Our efforts are yielding impressive results. We achieved record-breaking engagement with 2.17 billion impressions across our social media channels, website and press releases. Our commitment to excellence was further recognized with the prestigious Destination Marketing Accreditation Program designation with distinction from Destinations International and the Illinois Excellence in Tourism Award for Best Website at the Illinois Governor’s Conference on Travel and Tourism. Our award-winning website attracted 332,216 unique visitors from all 50 states and 200 countries in FY24.

Our sales team has been highly active, attending 18 trade shows and engaging with 488 event planners, generating 259 potential clients for meetings, group tours and sporting events in the Chicago Southland region. Additionally, our hotels consistently ranked among the top three in Chicagoland CVBs with a commendable average hotel occupancy rate of 64.1%.

Looking ahead, we are excited about the future. The anticipated opening of Wind Creek Chicago Southland Casino in East Hazel Crest/Homewood and the development of new hotels across Bedford Park, Lansing, Matteson, Oak Forest, Orland Park and Peotone will significantly enrich our region. The Wintrust Sports Complex at Bedford Park will soon be neighbors to the practice facility for the WNBA’s Chicago Sky, and our business development department is expanding opportunities for our partners.

As we continue to navigate this evolving landscape, our dedication to fostering partnerships and promoting major events remains steadfast. We are deeply grateful for your support and collaboration, which fuels our mission to showcase the Chicago Southland region.

Thank you for being an integral part of our journey. Together, we will continue to change the odds and create extraordinary experiences for all.



Richard Brink
Chairperson

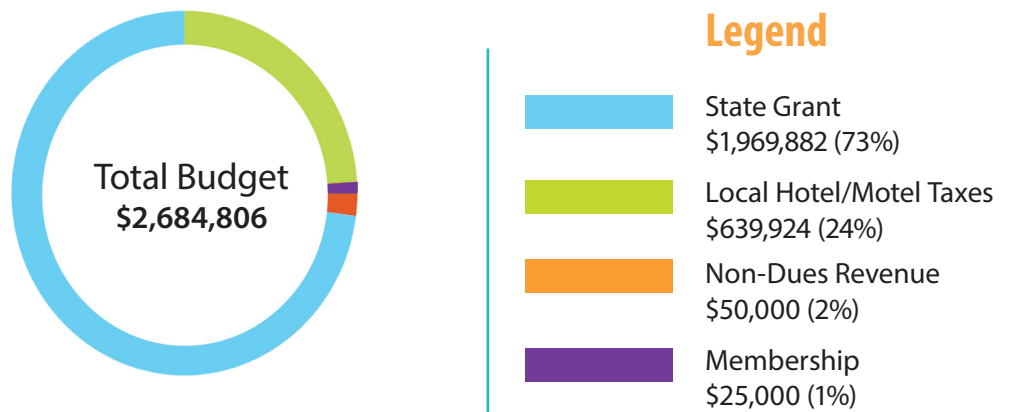
Mary Patchin, CDME
President, CEO

Financial Highlights

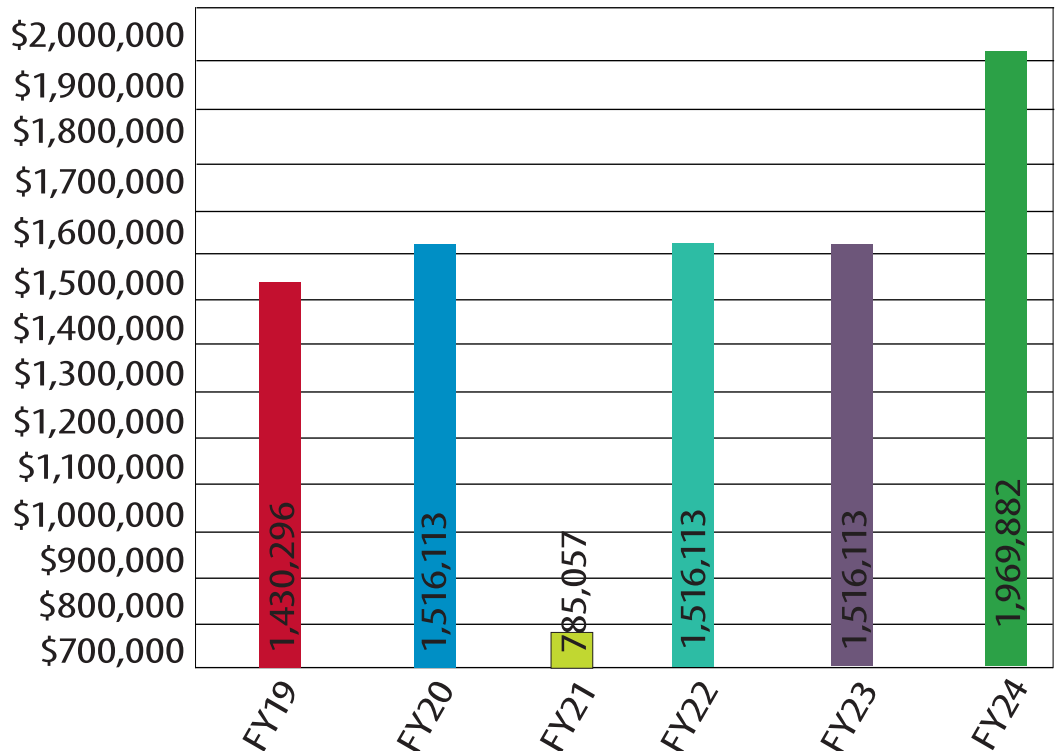
How the VCS is Funded

Visit Chicago Southland is a regionally funded destination marketing and management organization. The FY24 annual budget was composed of several funding sources including a \$1,969,882 state grant. The Local Tourism Convention Bureau Grant program requires the recipient to match the grant funds. The match funds are comprised of three main sources. First, Visit Chicago Southland has funding agreements with 16 municipalities to receive a portion of their transient/motel room tax for marketing purposes. Second, Visit Chicago Southland has a growing membership that makes an annual investment in its programs. Third, Visit Chicago Southland develops resources including non-dues revenue, to enhance and expand its programming responsibilities.

The LTCB Grant is awarded to Illinois certified Convention & Visitors Bureaus to enable them to conduct national and regional sales efforts and promotional activities designed to increase the number of travelers visiting their areas.



Local Tourism Convention Bureau (LTCB) Grant Growth



Tourism Impact

2023 Illinois Tourism Impact

More than 112.4 MILLION visitors enjoyed Illinois

Visitors spent \$47.2 BILLION in Illinois

Illinois state and local tax revenue reached \$4.58 BILLION

Illinois generated \$322 MILLION in Hotel/Motel tax

Visitor spending supported 278,200 JOBS

(Source: Economic Impact of Visitors in Illinois 2023)

Illinois tourism SAVES the average Illinois household \$1,300 in taxes each year

Fiscal Year 2024 Hotel Performance

Chicago Southland hotels reached an average hotel occupancy rate of 64.1% for Fiscal Year 2024.

Average daily rate reached an average of \$107.53 for the region.

Hotel revenues reached \$203,094,825 this year.

Chicago Southland hotels sold 1.87 Million room nights.

(Source: Smith Travel Research report)

Hotel Occupancy

FY20:	59.5%
FY21:	65.5%
FY22:	66.7%
FY23:	66.6%
FY24:	64.1%

Average Daily Rate

FY20:	\$76.72
FY21:	\$76.10
FY22:	\$97.96
FY23:	\$106.96
FY24:	\$107.53

Front Line Training

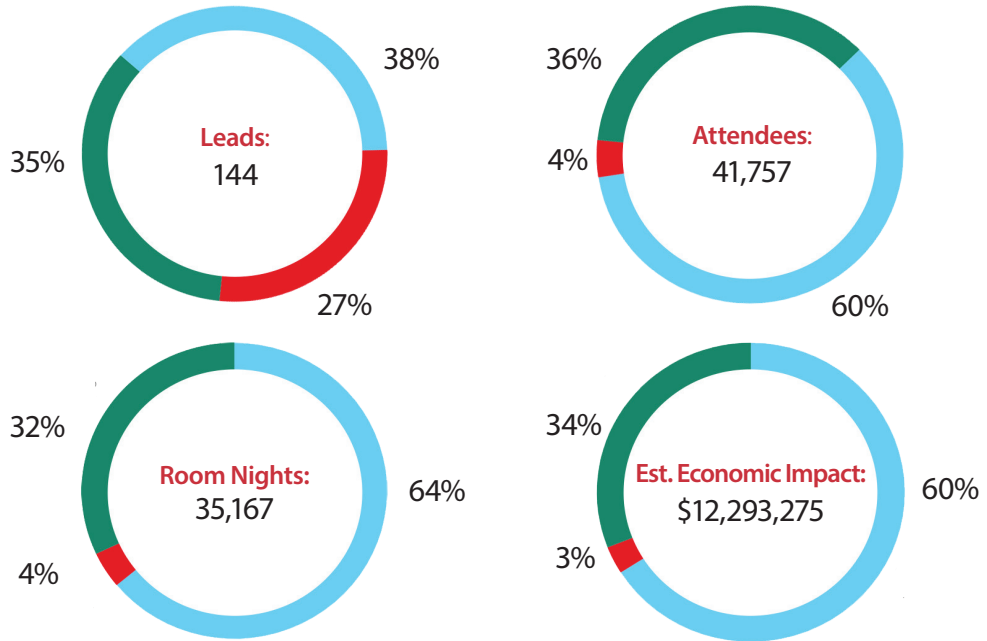


In FY15 VCS developed a front line training program and since has successfully certified 221 area front line staff as official Chicago Southland Front Line Ambassadors.

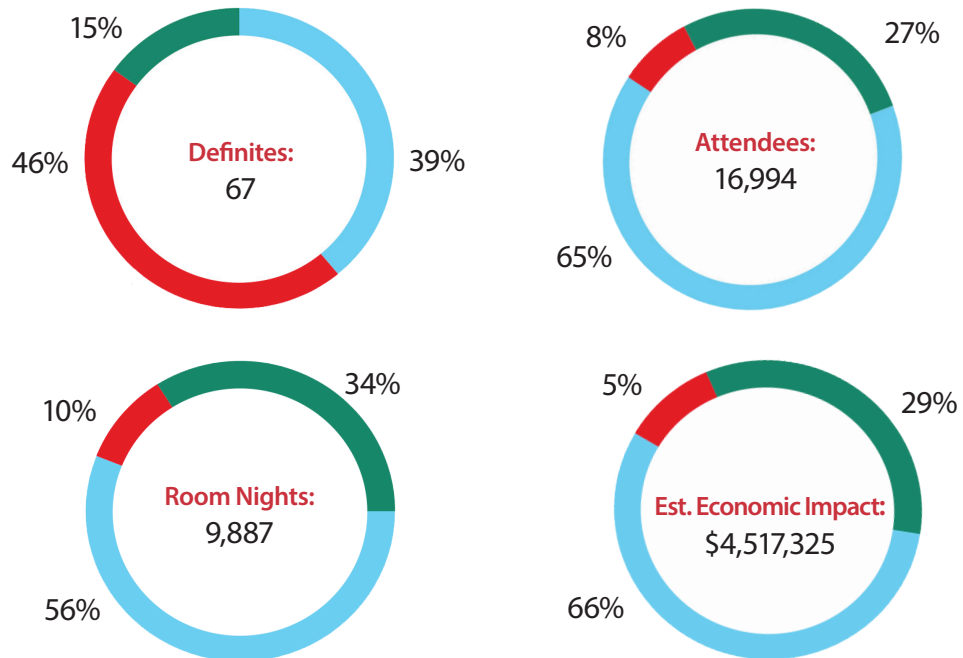


Sales Impact

Leads



Definites



Advertising Campaigns Definite Room Nights

Meetings

- State Co-op Campaign: 1,583 Room Nights

Leisure

- Adara State Co-op Campaign: 3,856 Room Nights
- Expedia State Co-op Campaign: 2,631 Room Nights

Legend

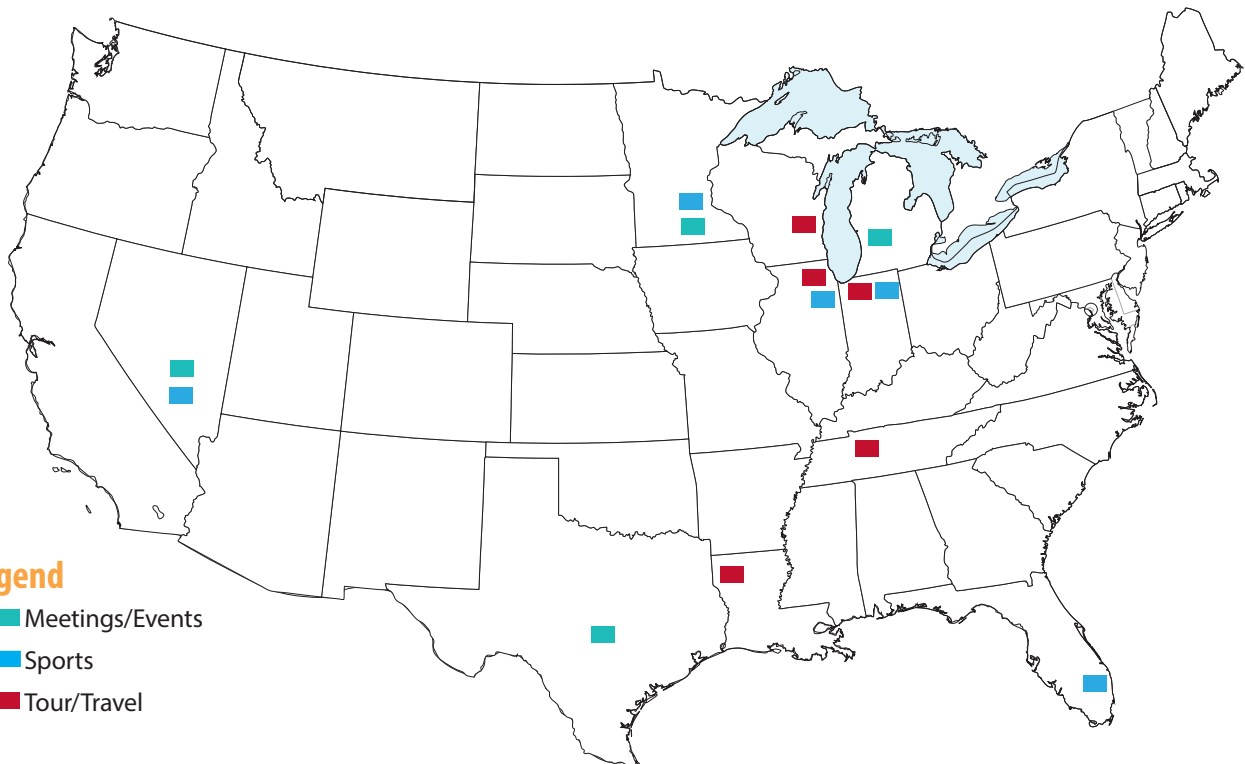
- Meetings/Events
- Sports
- Tour/Travel

Attended 18 Tradeshows in FY24

Attending national tradeshows is vital to bringing new meetings, group tours and sporting events to the Chicago Southland region. It is the responsibility of Visit Chicago Southland to represent the Chicago Southland and its hotels, venues and communities on a national level at these tradeshows. Bringing new events to a region is very competitive, therefore it is imperative that the Chicago Southland is represented at these tradeshows by the official destination management organization, Visit Chicago Southland. The sales department attended **18** industry tradeshows in FY24, resulting in **488** appointments and **259** prospects.



- American Bus Association (Nashville, TN)
- Circle Wisconsin (Fond du Lac, WI)
- Connect Marketplace - Association (Minneapolis, MN)
- Connect Marketplace - Corporate (Minneapolis, MN)
- Connect Marketplace - Midwest (Grand Rapids, MI)
- Connect Marketplace - Specialty (Minneapolis, MN)
- Connect Marketplace - Sports (Minneapolis, MN)
- Connect Spring Marketplace - Association (Las Vegas, NV)
- Connect Spring Marketplace - Corporate (Las Vegas, NV)
- Connect Spring Marketplace - Diversity (Las Vegas, NV)
- Connect Spring Marketplace - Sports (Las Vegas, NV)
- Heartland Travel Showcase (South Bend, IN)
- Heritage Club International (Rosemont, IL)
- National Tour Association (Shreveport, LA)
- Religious Conference Management Association (San Antonio, TX)
- S.P.O.R.T.S. - The Relationship Show (South Bend, IN)
- Sports Illinois Huddle (Bedford Park, IL)
- TEAMS (Palm Beach, FL)



Marketing Impact

Google AdWords

AdWords Pay-Per-Click program generated **56,140** clicks with **1,077,461** impressions.

Print Publications

Publications	Annual Circulation
Visitors Guide	120,000
Festivals & Events Guide (Fall/Winter)	7,500
Festivals & Events Guide (Spring/Summer)	8,000
Coupon Book	7,500
Railfan Brochure	10,000

Website

www.VisitChicagoSouthland.com

Visit Chicago Southland's website VisitChicagoSouthland.com inspires travel to the Chicago Southland and provides pertinent information for all market segments. The site's responsive design lets visitors access Chicago Southland info on desktop or tablet, and find last-minute information on their phone when they arrive. **332,216** unique visitors came from **200** countries and all **50** states. **96%** of web visitors are from beyond the Chicago Southland.



Social Media

Facebook	
Followers	9,186
Posts	1,272
Interactions	83,905
Interactions/Post	66

Instagram	
Followers	1,644
Posts	496
Interactions	1,731
Interactions/Post	3.5

X	
Followers	3,889
Tweets	629
Interactions	1,271
Interactions/Post	2

LinkedIn	
Followers	1,021
Posts	519
Interactions	4,122
Interactions/Post	8

YouTube	
Views	3,149
Minutes Watched	2,842

Overall organic social media impressions **902,756**

Visit Chicago Southland continued to boost group market and leisure social media posts resulting in over **17 million** impressions and **93,129** clicks.*

*Includes boosted social media posts through Cook County Tourism Recovery Initiative



Chicago Southland App

The Visit Chicago Southland App was launched in FY18, providing visitors an interactive experience featuring attractions, restaurants, hotels and events. The app also allows visitors to find amenities nearby while in the Chicago Southland. In FY24, the app/widget had **16,359** sessions and **23,232** page views. Additionally, the Chicago Southland trails app had **1,999** users in Fiscal Year 2024.

Destination Video

Visit Chicago Southland continued to promote the interactive destination video, which resulted in **1,592** video clicks for the fiscal year.

Advertising Highlights

Publications/Digital Insertions	Annual Circulation/ Impressions
56 Meetings/Conventions	30,735,396
65 Tour/Travel	618,346
53 Leisure	55,038,438
43 Sports	910,299
15 Social	147,414
232 Total Placements	87,449,893*

*Includes leisure campaigns completed through the Cook County Tourism Recovery Initiative.



Targeting/Retargeting Campaign

Visit Chicago Southland implemented a group markets targeting/retargeting campaign (Cook County Tourism Recovery Initiative) using Google display network, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. The campaign resulted in over **2.9 million** impressions and **11,140** clicks to the website.



Brochure Distribution

915 visitors were assisted at the Visitor Information Center at the Chicago Southland Lincoln Oasis in South Holland. Digital billboards at the VIC allowed Visit Chicago Southland to promote available guides when not staffed and partners to advertise as well.

39,731 Visit Chicago Southland and partner brochures were distributed at the Visitor Information Center and **11,709** more through inquiries to Visit Chicago Southland. The digital visitors guide garnered over **871** views.

Communications

Visit Chicago Southland continues to craft compelling pitches for local, national and trade media that resulted in **119** articles that earned over **2 billion** media impressions.

Threshold 360

In Fiscal Year 2021, VCS partnered with **Threshold 360** to create virtual tours of local hotel properties, sports facilities, unique venues and more. For FY24, this program resulted in **107,227** web views, **2,328,260** Google views and **466,423** engagements. These virtual tours allow event planners to safely visit or tour a facility, or revisit the space after an in-person site inspection. These videos are embedded into each member listing, and they are displayed in Google searches as well. The partnership with Threshold 360 is an exciting way to promote our partners and their one-of-a-kind facilities that help make the Chicago Southland a unique and exciting place to visit.



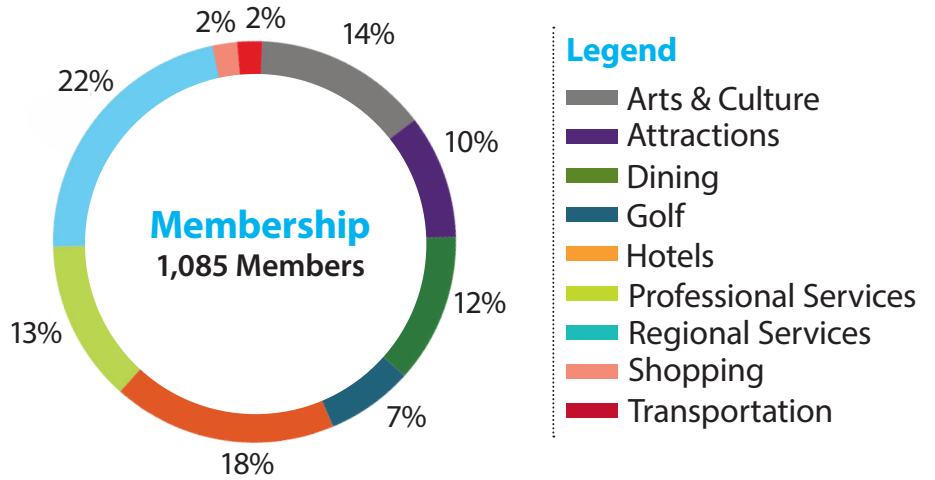
Unveiled in summer 2024, our state-of-the-art Visitor Information Center offers an immersive experience with interactive displays, touch-screen kiosks and a 360-degree panoramic view of the region. With a staffed information desk and comprehensive guides, it provides an ideal starting point for a seamless and memorable visit.



Membership & Grants

Membership

Visit Chicago Southland's partners are the core of the hospitality industry in the Chicago Southland. From the little local pizza joints to the major shopping malls, VCS continues to attract and keep members through the VCS orientation and front line ambassador programs and events like the Annual Meeting & Awards Luncheon and the National Tourism Week Hospitality Showcase.



Local Tourism Grant Program

VCS's Local Tourism Grant Program awarded **\$44,832** in Local Tourism Grant Funds to **10** organizations/projects for the promotion of events aimed to attract visitors from outside the Chicago Southland. VCS hosted **six** local grant workshops and several individual consultations.

Village of Bridgeview North Coast Music Festival I	Bridgeview	\$5,000
Village of Bridgeview North Coast Music Festival II	Bridgeview	\$5,000
Village of Bridgeview Lyrical Lemonade Summer Smash	Bridgeview	\$5,000
Chicago Gaelic Park Irish Fest	Oak Forest	\$5,000
Future Entrepreneurs of America Fall Baseball League	South Holland	\$5,000

Village of Lynwood Big Time Hoops I	Lynwood	\$5,000
Village of Lynwood Big Time Hoops II	Lynwood	\$2,000
Orland Park Chamber of Commerce Summerfest	Orland Park	\$2,832
Village of Orland Park Centennial Park West Concerts	Orland Park	\$5,000
United States Hockey League	Orland Park	\$5,000

Accolades

Visit Chicago Southland proudly received the **Illinois Excellence in Tourism Award** for Best Website (Budget A) at the 2024 Governor's Conference on Travel & Tourism in Peoria, Illinois. This prestigious recognition highlights the outstanding enhancements made to our website, which now features cutting-edge AI-powered accessibility widgets, an intuitive "Plan Your Trip" interface, and engaging interactive videos. Visitors can explore 360-degree virtual tour videos of local amenities, enjoy seamless mobile responsiveness and access a downloadable app. The website also boasts improved photo-driven navigation and a richer collection of user-generated content, all designed to create a more dynamic and user-friendly experience.



Visit Chicago Southland has proudly achieved the prestigious **Destination Marketing Accreditation Program (DMAP) designation with distinction** from Destinations International, a prestigious honor awarded to organizations that exceed standard accreditation requirements. To earn this distinction, we not only met but exceeded 100 rigorous performance standards and aspirational benchmarks. This accolade recognizes our exceptional commitment to industry excellence and adherence to comprehensive global standards for destination organization performance and accountability. The DMAP accreditation involves compliance with a broad set of mandatory and voluntary standards across critical areas such as governance, finance, human resources, sales, communications, destination development, and research. Our distinction highlights our exceptional operational breadth and steadfast dedication to advancing the destination we proudly represent.



Suburban Cook County Travel & Tourism Recovery Initiative

In January 2022, the Cook County Board of Commissioners approved a \$10M allocation, over three years, for the Suburban Cook County Travel, Tourism, and Hospitality Economic Recovery Initiative as part their American Recovery Plan Act (ARPA) State & Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) allocation. The funding is being used for countywide tourism projects and distributions for local projects to five convention and visitor bureaus - Chicago Southland, Chicago's North Shore, Meet Chicago Northwest, Rosemont and Visit Oak Park.

There are three major programs identified that are universal to all five Suburban Cook County convention and visitor bureaus.

Chicago Southland Cook County Tourism Alive FY24 Highlights

Static Billboard Program

Features hard-hit hotels and hospitality businesses due to the COVID-19 pandemic at specific exits to educate and further encourage interstate travelers to exit and stay at a featured Cook County hotel or visit a hospitality business either immediately or in the near future. Billboards were placed for a full year in the following communities: Alsip, Bedford Park, Country Club Hills, Crestwood, Lansing, Oak Forest and South Holland.

Leisure Recovery Campaign

An extensive programmatic and social media campaign was developed with focus on leisure activities (golf, arts/culture, festivals/events, trails, railfanning, live music, restaurants and breweries). In addition to the digital placements, one print ad was placed in the fall issue of Midwest Living. Results on pages 8-9.

Targeting/Retargeting Group Markets

Visit Chicago Southland initiated a group markets targeting/retargeting campaign using Google display network, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn to encourage recovery. Results on page 9.

Carvertise

This year, we partnered with Carvertise to execute a groundbreaking vehicle wrap advertising campaign aimed at boosting our brand visibility and consumer engagement. Over a three-month period, eye-catching wraps were deployed on a fleet of vehicles in Indianapolis, including prominent events like the Indy 500 and the U.S. Olympic



Swim Trials. This strategic placement resulted in over one million impressions and a 28% increase in website traffic compared to the previous year. The campaign also achieved a significant boost in online interactions. Additionally, it proved to be cost-effective, delivering a lower cost per impression compared to traditional advertising methods.

Countywide Projects:

- Regional Tourism Marketing Campaign
- Workforce Development Project
- Outdoor/Recreational Promotional Program

Visit Chicago Southland received funding in FY24 for use in projects that generate increases in visitors to local tourism attractions, customers to local businesses and group business bookings for 2024, 2025 and 2026.

Bandwango Mobile Passports

Bandwango offers mobile passports that drive consumer engagement by organizing "Things To Do" into a curated selection of experiences, either free or paid, which seamlessly integrate into participating businesses' websites. Users of these mobile passports can check in at various locations to earn points redeemable for exciting prizes. In FY24, we expanded our offerings by developing six new Bandwango mobile passports, bringing the total to eight distinct passports. These were actively promoted throughout the fiscal year and have collectively achieved 200 check-ins to date. The passports include:

- Savor the Southland (Restaurants)
- Tee It Up (Golf Courses)
- Artistic Sights of the Southland (Visual Arts)
- The Curtain Call (Performing Arts)
- Suds Buds Pass (Breweries)
- Disc Golf Pro Pass (Disc Golf)
- Pizza Pass (Pizza Restaurants)
- Hot Diggity Dog Pass (Hot Dog Restaurants and Stands)

Additionally, to enhance the prize redemption experience, we produced a range of Southland Swag including stickers, coasters, mugs, tote bags, t-shirts and sweatshirts.



Community Signage

Visit Chicago Southland has introduced a groundbreaking signage program designed to boost visibility for hotel communities and stimulate tourism throughout the county.



This initiative offers funding for the design, development and installation of various types of destination signage, including wayfinding signs, electronic displays, welcome monument signs and 3-D letter signs tailored to enhance social media engagement. Fox Pointe served as the pilot location for this program, unveiling a striking 3-D letter welcome sign last October. Standing four-and-a-half feet tall and extending 12 feet wide, this eye-catching sign adds a dynamic element to the landscape and offers a popular photo opportunity for visitors. In FY24, seven additional signs were completed through our grant program, and the remaining signs will be funded through the Cook County Tourism Alive program, further extending the reach and impact of this exciting initiative.

Fiscal Year 2024

Board of Directors

<i>Alsip</i>	John Ryan, Mayor Richard Brink, DoubleTree by Hilton
<i>Bedford Park</i>	David Brady, Mayor Joseph Ronovsky, Wintrust Sports Complex
<i>Bridgeview</i>	Steve Landek, Mayor
<i>Burbank</i>	Roy Patel, Best Western Inn & Suites
<i>Calumet City</i>	Deanne Jaffrey, Chief of Staff/City Administrator
<i>Chicago Heights</i>	David Gonzalez, Mayor
<i>Crestwood</i>	Brian Skala, Trustee
<i>East Hazel Crest</i>	Maureen Forté, Trustee
<i>Homewood</i>	Jodi Kennedy, La Banque Hotel
<i>Lansing</i>	Dr. Maureen Grady-Perovich, Trustee Aemish Patel, Holiday Inn Express & Suites
<i>Markham</i>	Derrick Champion, City Administrator
<i>Matteson</i>	Keith Chambers, Deputy Administrator Arnette Witherspoon, Hampton Inn and Suites
<i>Monee</i>	Edward Gross, Police Commissioner
<i>Oak Forest</i>	Paul Ruane, Community Planner
<i>Orland Hills</i>	Conrad Kiebles, Community Appointment
<i>Orland Park</i>	Ed Lelo, Economic Development Director
<i>South Holland</i>	Travis Bandstra, Director of Community Development
<i>South Suburban Mayors & Managers Association (SSMMA)</i>	Rick Reinbold, Mayor of Richton Park
<i>Southwest Conference of Mayors</i>	Vicky Smith, Executive Director
<i>Will County Governmental League</i>	Jada Porter, Transportation Planning Liaison
<i>College/University Appointment</i>	Dr. Michael Anthony, Prairie State College
<i>Exhibition Appointment</i>	Annie Byrne, Southland Center
<i>General Membership Appointment</i>	Cathy Mein, Orland Square
<i>Arts & Culture Appointment</i>	Jeff Stevenson, Nathan Manilow Sculpture Park
<i>Transportation Appointment</i>	LaVern Murphy, Village of Hazel Crest

Executive Committee

Chairperson: Richard Brink
Vice Chairperson: Jodi Kennedy
Treasurer: LaVern Murphy
Secretary: Vicky Smith
Executive Committee Board
Member: Aemish Patel
President/CEO: Mary Patchin, CDME

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Vicky Smith
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Business Development Manager: Chris Craven
VIC Information Specialist: Rolanda Hudson

Visit Chicago Southland
19900 Governors Drive, Suite 200
Olympia Fields, IL 60461
708-895-8200 | Fax 708-895-8288 | Toll Free 888-895-8233
www.VisitChicagoSouthland.com | Info@VisitChicagoSouthland.com