

Cheers to

40 YEARS!



VISIT CHICAGO SOUTHLAND

FY 26 ANNUAL REPORT



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 39 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.

2023-2027 Strategic Plan

Adopted in FY23, VCS's Five-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

For 40 years, Visit Chicago Southland has worked to tell the story of our region, create meaningful visitor experiences and strengthen the communities we proudly represent. As we celebrate this milestone anniversary, our theme — Cheers to 40 Years: Celebrating Four Decades of Progress — reflects not only how far we've come but the momentum carrying us into the future.

What began in an era of printed visitors guides and face-to-face tradeshow has evolved into a dynamic destination organization powered by digital innovation, storytelling and authentic connections. While the tools and platforms have changed across four decades, our mission remains the same: to inspire travel, drive economic impact and showcase all that makes Chicago Southland exceptional.

This year marked exciting growth and achievement across the organization. We launched our first-ever Visit Chicago Southland Podcast, creating a new platform to share the stories, people and places that define our region. Our refreshed website delivered an enhanced user experience while expanding opportunities to connect visitors with local businesses and experiences.

Our efforts continued to generate strong results through marketing and sales initiatives that contributed to more than 23,000 hotel room bookings and expanded awareness of the destination. Through participation in 17 national tradeshow, our team created valuable opportunities for future business and visitation.

We also celebrated meaningful recognition this year. Visit Chicago Southland earned the Smart Stars 2026 Award for Best Value CVB/DMO and our destination partners continued to receive national acclaim, including multiple sports tourism honors and professional achievements that elevated our region's reputation.

Innovation remained at the center of our work. From expanding mobile passport engagement with prize redemptions sent to visitors from eight states including Hawaii to enhancing the Visitor Information Center experience and installing additional community signage, we continued creating new ways for visitors to engage with Chicago Southland. Our social media initiatives also reached new heights as we hosted a record number of influencers who showcased our partner businesses and attractions, helping introduce new audiences to the experiences that make our destination unique.

This year also marked important milestones for our organization and destination. We proudly relocated into new office space designed to support collaboration, innovation and continued growth for the future of tourism in Chicago Southland. We officially kicked off the America 250 celebration, showcasing our communities and connecting visitors with the stories that shaped our nation. Our digital audience continued to grow as we surpassed 10,000 followers on Facebook, expanding our ability to engage travelers and inspire visitation. Looking ahead, new hotel development and continued investment in tourism assets across the region position Chicago Southland for sustained success and opportunity.

Progress over four decades would not have been possible without the support of our partners, stakeholders and communities. Thank you for being part of this journey. Here's to celebrating 40 years of progress — and to everything we will accomplish together in the decades ahead.



Jodi Kennedy
Chairperson

Mary Patchin, CDME
President & CEO

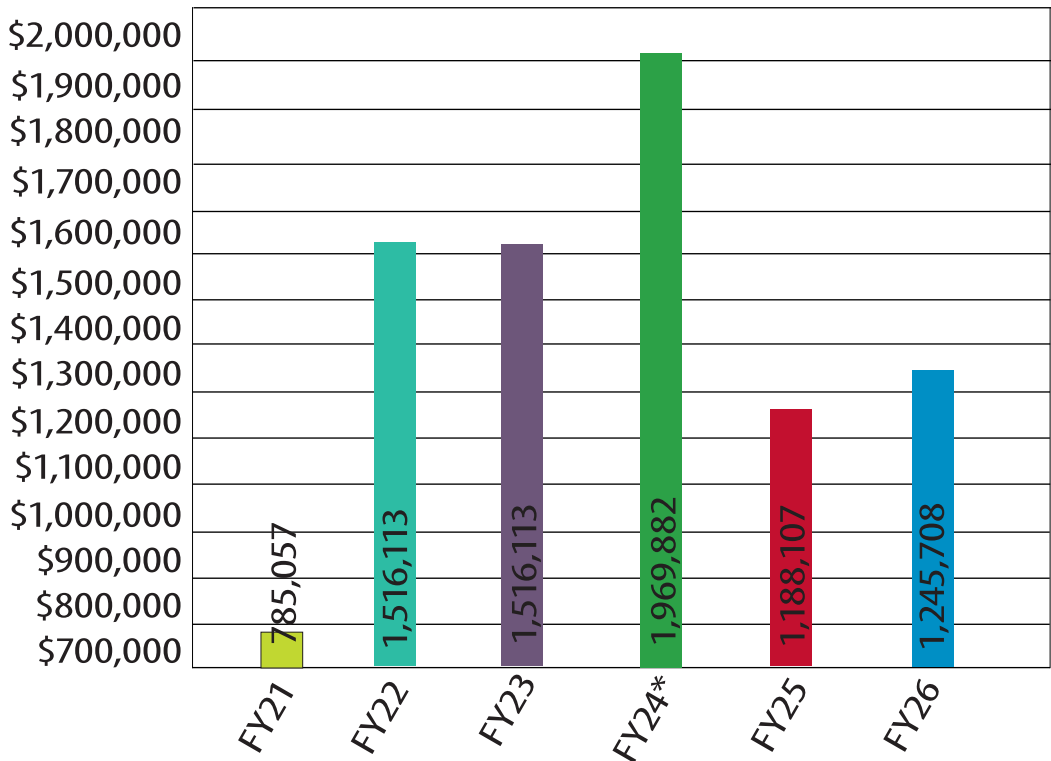
How the VCS is Funded

Visit Chicago Southland is a regionally funded Destination Marketing and Management Organization (DMMO). Its FY26 annual budget includes multiple revenue streams, with a significant portion—\$1,200,000—provided by the State of Illinois through the Local Tourism Convention Bureau (LTCB) Grant Program. This grant requires locally-funded match dollars, which Visit Chicago Southland fulfills through three primary sources: first, funding agreements with 18 partner municipalities that allocate a portion of their hotel/motel tax revenues to support marketing efforts; second, a growing partnership base that pays annual dues to support the organization’s programs; and third, the development of non-dues revenue through sponsorships and other initiatives to enhance and expand programming.

The LTCB Grant supports Illinois-certified Convention & Visitors Bureaus (CVBs) in executing national and regional sales, marketing and promotional initiatives designed to increase visitation and generate economic impact for their destinations.



Local Tourism Convention Bureau (LTCB) Grant Growth



*Includes an additional state grant of \$650,000

Tourism Impact

2025 Illinois Tourism Impact

More than 115 MILLION visitors enjoyed Illinois

Visitors spent \$50.2 BILLION in Illinois

Illinois state and local tax revenue reached \$4.9 BILLION

Illinois generated \$372 MILLION in Hotel/Motel tax

Visitor spending supported 286,620 JOBS

(Source: Economic Impact of Visitors in Illinois 2025)

Illinois tourism SAVES the average Illinois household \$1,403 in taxes each year

Fiscal Year 2026 Hotel Performance

Chicago Southland hotels reached an average hotel occupancy rate of 63.1% for Fiscal Year 2026.

Average daily rate reached an average of \$111.79 for the region.

Hotel revenues reached \$215,643,955 this year.

Chicago Southland hotels sold 1.9 Million room nights.

(Source: Smith Travel Research report)

Hotel Occupancy

FY22:	66.7%
FY23:	66.6%
FY24:	64.1%
FY25:	65.3%
FY26:	63.1%

Average Daily Rate

FY22:	\$97.96
FY23:	\$106.96
FY24:	\$107.53
FY25:	\$109.21
FY26:	\$111.79

Front Line Training

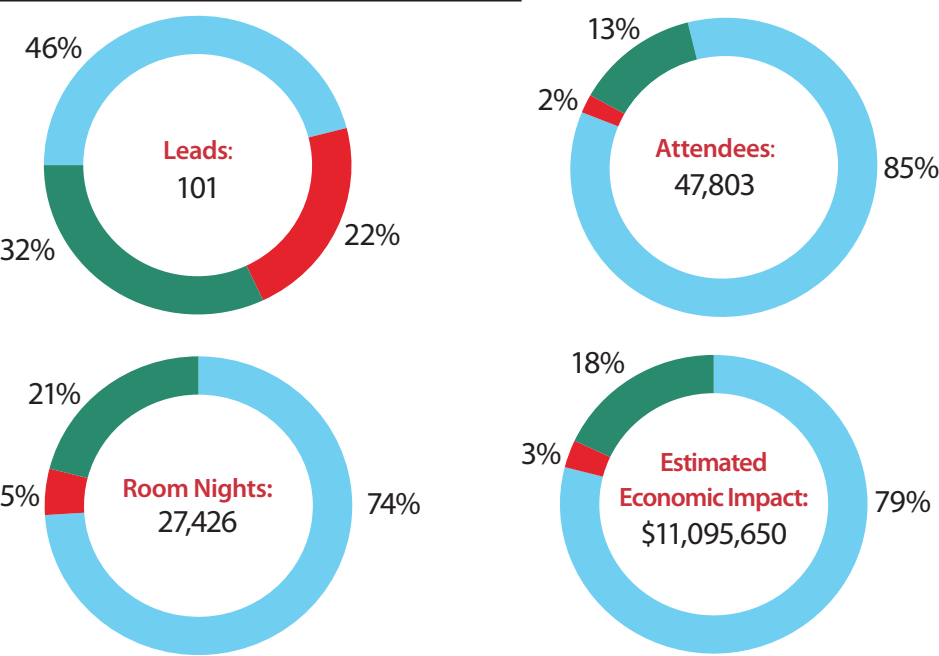


In FY15 VCS developed a front line training program and since has successfully certified 237 area front line staff as official Chicago Southland Front Line Ambassadors.

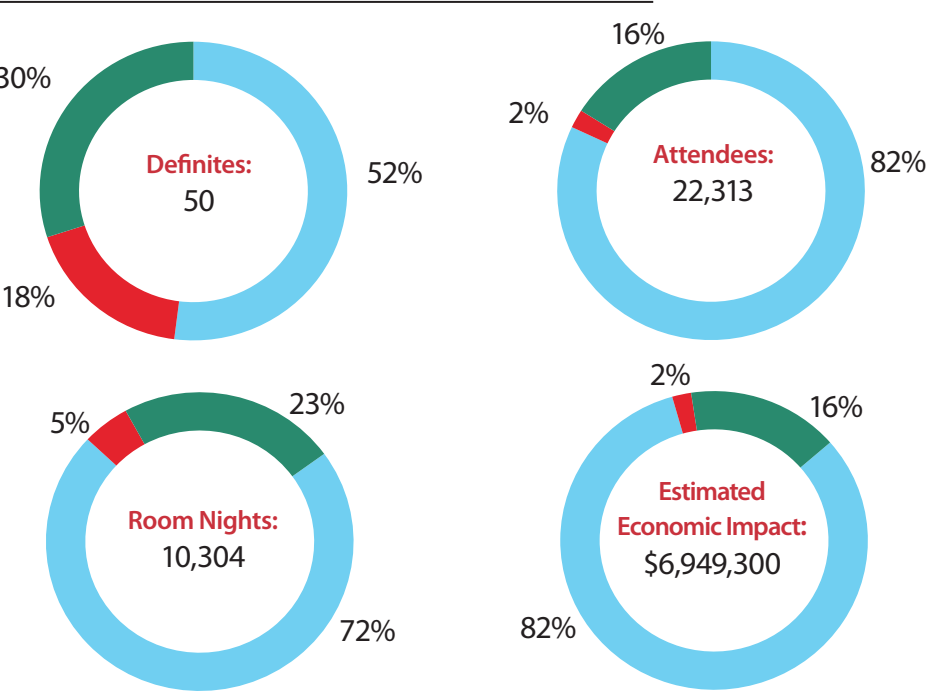


Sales Impact

Leads



Definites



Advertising Campaigns Definite Room Nights

Meetings

- MICE Campaign: 98 Room Nights

Leisure

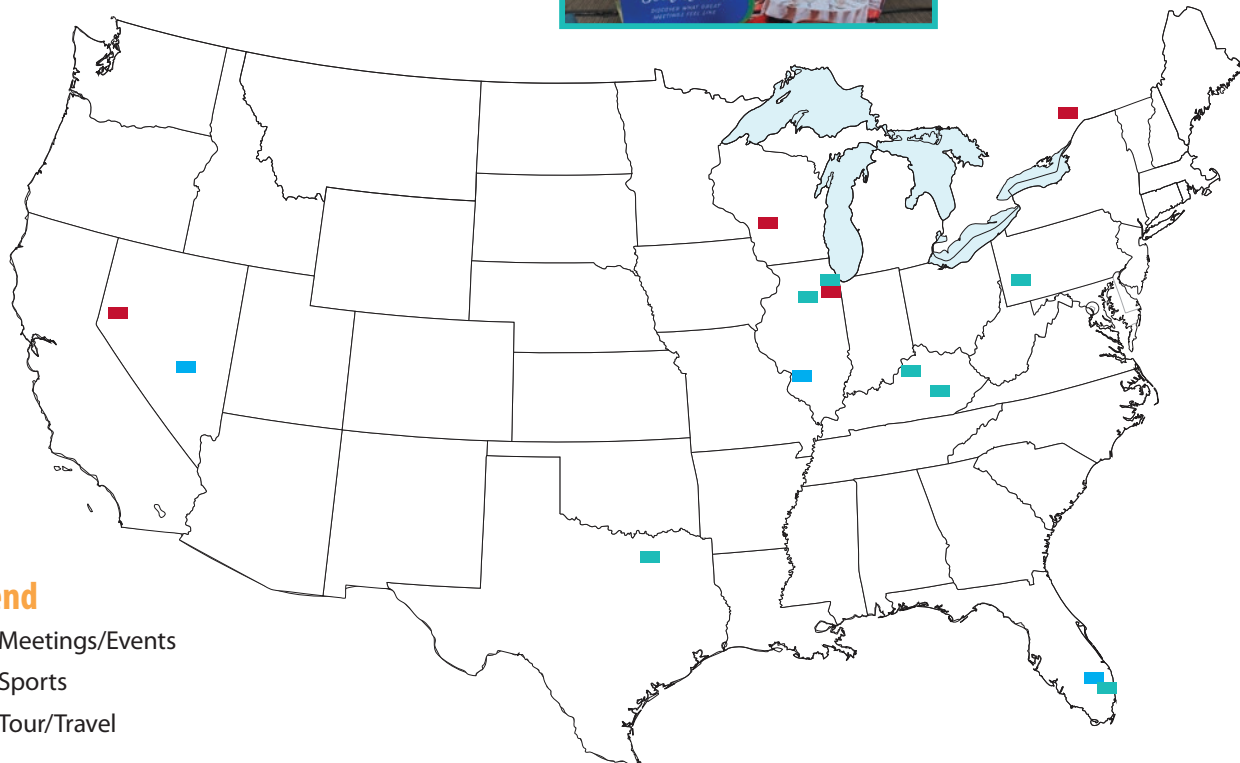
- Expedia Campaign & State Co-op Campaigns: 13,191 (Expedia campaign includes: Expedia, Cheap Tickets, Orbitz, Travelocity, Hotels.com)



Attended 17 Tradeshows in FY26

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 **17** industry tradeshows in FY26, resulting in **582** appointments and **250** prospects.

- American Bus Association (Reno, NV)
- Circle Wisconsin (La Crosse, WI)
- Connect Faith (Fort Worth, TX)
- Connect Marketplace - Association (Miami, FL)
- Connect Marketplace - Corporate (Miami, FL)
- Connect Marketplace - North (Pittsburgh, PA)
- Connect Marketplace - Specialty (Miami, FL)
- Connect Marketplace - Sports (Miami, FL)
- Connect Spring Marketplace - Association (Louisville, KY)
- Connect Spring Marketplace - Corporate (Louisville, KY)
- Holiday Showcase (Chicago, IL)
- Midwest Band Clinic (Chicago, IL)
- National Tour Association (Ottawa, CA)
- Religious Conference Management Association (Lexington, KY)
- Sports Events & Tourism Associates (Las Vegas, NV)
- Sports Illinois Huddle (Collinsville, IL)
- Venue Series (Naperville, IL)



Marketing Impact

Google AdWords

AdWords Pay-Per-Click program generated **36,484** clicks with **2,568,095** impressions.

Print Publications

Publications	Annual Circulation
Visitors Guide	100,000
Festivals & Events Guide (Fall/Winter)	6,000
Festivals & Events Guide (Spring/Summer)	8,000
Coupon Book	7,500

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 refreshed and responsive design lets visitors access Chicago Southland info on desktop or tablet, and find last-minute information on their phone when they arrive. **307,935** unique visitors came from **114** countries and all **50** states.



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 FY26, the app/widget had **35,424** sessions and **32,513** page views. Additionally, the Chicago Southland trails app had **1,399** users in Fiscal Year 2026.

Destination Video

Visit Chicago Southland continued to promote the interactive destination video, which resulted in **599** video clicks for the fiscal year.

Social Media



Facebook

Followers	10,057
Posts	1,535
Interactions	44,076
Interactions/Post	29



Instagram

Followers	2,051
Posts	408
Interactions	1,921
Interactions/Post	4.7



X

Followers	3,746
Posts	382
Interactions	404
Interactions/Post	1.2



LinkedIn

Followers	1,249
Posts	314
Interactions	3,294
Interactions/Post	10



YouTube

Views	10,434
Minutes Watched	3,582

Overall organic social media impressions **785,583**

Visit Chicago Southland continued to boost group market and leisure social media posts resulting in just under **4 million** impressions and **56,574** clicks.*

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

Advertising Highlights

Publications/Digital Insertions	Annual Circulation/ Impressions
26 Meetings/Conventions	7,259,513
30 Tour/Travel	151,714
35 Leisure	17,562,181
7 Sports	65,673
12 Social	9,043
110 Total Placements	25,048,124*

*Includes 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 **4.4 million** impressions and **22,549** clicks to the website.

Brochure Distribution

1,179 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.

42,015 Visit Chicago Southland and partner brochures were distributed at the Visitor Information Center and **8,339** more through inquiries to Visit Chicago Southland. The digital visitors guide garnered over **829** views.

Communications

Visit Chicago Southland continues to craft compelling pitches for local, national and trade media that resulted in **48** articles that earned over **9.4 million** media impressions.

Social Media Influencer Campaign

Between April and June 2026, Visit Chicago Southland hosted **12** content creators. The campaign resulted in visits to **34** different Chicago Southland partnered locations with an emphasis on arts and culture.



Photo Credit Rueben Aguirre



Five of the influencers were part of a Visit Chicago Southland FAM tour as a predecessor to their attending the Midwest Travel Network Conference.

The campaign generated over **3 million** impressions across social media platforms boosting the region's digital reach.

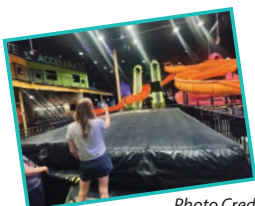


Photo Credit Kidslist



Photo Credit Adri & Kam

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 FY26, this program resulted in **292,620** web views, **769,288** Google views and **645,508** 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.



Visit Chicago Southland Podcast

In FY26, Visit Chicago Southland expanded its storytelling efforts with the launch of the Visit Chicago Southland Podcast: Where Boring Doesn't Exist. Premiering on March 2, the podcast was created to spotlight the people, places, attractions and experiences that make the Chicago Southland a vibrant destination for visitors and residents alike.

New episodes are released during the first week of each month and are available on YouTube, Spotify and iTunes,



helping Visit Chicago Southland reach audiences across multiple digital platforms. A total of five episodes were produced resulting in **379** views/listens and a **60.42%** completion rate.

The podcast provides an engaging new way to connect audiences with local businesses, attractions, dining, events and hidden gems throughout the region while strengthening partner visibility and regional awareness.



Scan to
subscribe.

Visitor Information Center

New interior door signage was added at both entrances of the Visitor Information Center to improve visibility and help guide visitors into the space. In addition, an A-frame sign was placed near the north exit doors to encourage guests who may have missed the VIC to stop in before leaving while also promoting the center to incoming visitors.



To create a more family-friendly visitor experience, Visit Chicago Southland also introduced custom coloring pages featuring several major regional attractions. Small boxes of crayons are available for children visiting the VIC, providing an engaging activity for families while showcasing Chicago Southland destinations in a fun and interactive way.

In FY26 a total of **2,424** kiosk views were recorded.

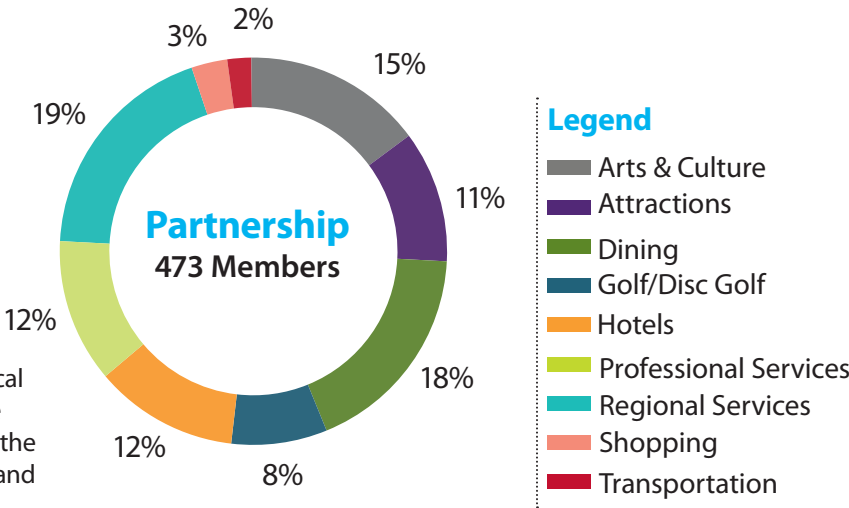
Partnership & Grants

Partnership

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 partners 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 **\$43,126** in Local Tourism Grant Funds to **nine** 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 2025 3rd Submission	Bridgeview	\$5,000
Village of Bridgeview North Coast Music Festival 2026 1st Submission	Bridgeview	\$5,000
Village of Bridgeview North Coast Music Festival 2026 2nd Submission	Bridgeview	\$5,000
Village of Bridgeview FuelFest 2026 1st Submission	Bridgeview	\$5,000
Village of Bridgeview FuelFest 2026 2nd Submission	Bridgeview	\$5,000
Chicago Gaelic Park Irish Fest	Oak Forest	\$4,602
Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra Valentine's Day with IPO	Palos Heights	\$3,524
Outerbelt Alliance Outerbelt Trail Southland Visitors Guide	Flossmoor	\$5,000
Southland Development Authority ACHIEVE Summit 2026	East Hazel Crest	\$5,000

Accolades



Visit Chicago Southland and Wintrust Sports Complex at Bedford Park were honored with two **2025 Champions of Economic Impact Sports Tourism Awards from Sports Destination Management**. The awards recognized the

successful hosting of the 2025 USA Judo Junior Olympic Championships and the Under Armour Association Boys Basketball Finals. Together, the events attracted thousands of athletes and spectators to the Chicago Southland region while generating an estimated combined economic impact of nearly **\$7 million** for local hotels, restaurants and businesses. The recognition further highlights the continued success of the partnership between Visit Chicago Southland and Wintrust Sports Complex at Bedford Park in position in the region as a premier destination for sports tourism.



to providing affordable, high-quality meeting and event experiences while strengthening the region's reputation as a premier destination for conferences, conventions and group travel.

Wintrust Sports Complex at Bedford Park earned first place in **SportsEvents** magazine's inaugural **"Ultimate Volleyball Venue"** rankings, recognizing the facility as one of the nation's premier destinations for volleyball competition and events. The award highlighted the complex's outstanding amenities, versatility, technology, transportation access, and overall visitor experience for athletes, organizers, and spectators. The recognition further reinforces the facility's growing national reputation as a leading sports tourism destination and strengthens the Chicago Southland's position as a hub for elite amateur and professional sporting events.



Visit Chicago Southland was honored with the **2026 Smart Stars Award for "Best Value CVB/DMO"** by **Smart Meetings magazine**. Selected through votes from meeting professionals across the industry, the award recognizes organizations that deliver exceptional service, hospitality and overall value to planners and events. The recognition highlights Visit Chicago Southland's continued commitment

Visit Chicago Southland is proud to recognize **Group Tour Manager Tobie Fitzpatrick for earning the Certified Tour Professional (CTP) designation**. The certification demonstrates a commitment to professional development and excellence within the group tourism industry while enhancing the organization's ability to serve tour operators, travel planners, and group visitors. Tobie's achievement further strengthens Visit Chicago Southland's dedication to providing exceptional service and expertise in promoting the region as a premier group tour destination.

Cook County Tourism Alive

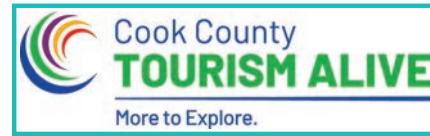
Suburban Cook County Travel & Tourism Recovery Initiative

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.

Countywide Projects:

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



Visit Chicago Southland received funding in FY26 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.

Chicago Southland Cook County Tourism Alive FY26 Highlights

Leisure Recovery Campaign

An extensive programmatic and social media campaign was continued with focus on leisure activities (golf, arts/culture, festivals/events, trails, railfanning, live music, restaurants and breweries). Results on pages 8-9.

Targeting/Retargeting Group Markets

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

Community Signage



In FY24, Visit Chicago Southland launched a groundbreaking signage program to elevate visibility for hotel communities and drive tourism across the region. The initiative provides funding

for the design, development and installation of destination signage—including wayfinding signs, electronic displays, welcome monument signs and 3D letter installations designed to boost social media engagement. In FY26, four additional signage projects were completed and funded through the Cook County Tourism Alive Program.

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. In FY26, these passports were actively promoted and have collectively achieved 887 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, we continue to distribute prizes, a range of Southland Swag, including stickers, coasters, mugs, tote bags, t-shirts and sweatshirts to users from the following states: California, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee.



Fiscal Year 2026

Board of Directors

<i>Alsip</i>	John Ryan, Mayor
<i>Bedford Park</i>	David Brady, Mayor
	Joseph Ronovsky, Wintrust Sports Complex
<i>Bridgeview</i>	Sheena Fox, Hampton Inn & Suites
<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, Village Clerk
	Aemish Patel, Holiday Inn Express & Suites
<i>Markham</i>	Derrick Champion, City Administrator
<i>Matteson</i>	N. Keith Chambers, Deputy Administrator
	Arnette Witherspoon, Hampton Inn and Suites
<i>Monee</i>	Edward Gross, Police Commissioner
<i>Oak Forest</i>	Paul Ruane, Asst. Dir. of Community & Economic Development
<i>Orland Hills</i>	Conrad Kiebles, Community Appointment
<i>Orland Park</i>	Ed Lelo, Economic Development Director
<i>Peotone</i>	Nick Palmer, Village Administrator
<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>	
Michael Bennett, Chicago Gaelic Park	
<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	

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Chairperson: Jodi Kennedy

Vice Chairperson: Vicky Smith

Treasurer: LaVern Murphy

Secretary: Aemish Patel

Past Chairperson/Director-at-Large:
Roy Patel

Past Board Chairpersons

Richard Brink
Daniel Fitzgerald
Aemish Patel
Vicky Smith
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Group Tour & Religious Marketing Manager: Tobie Fitzpatrick, CTP

Meetings Market Manager: Jennifer Ziltz

Sports Market Manager: Nathan Annis

Destination Marketing Manager: Liam Doyle

Destination Communications & Media Manager: Scott Rude

Administrative Assistant: Bernice Scheive

Partnership Development Manager: Chris Craven

VIC Information Specialist: Rolanda Hudson

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