

Rochester region's tourism industry has plenty of room to grow

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On a sunny Sunday afternoon, Solangee McNeal of Greece watches her sons, 4-year-old Christopher and 2-year-old Eric, running and dancing across a board of multi-colored lights in a supersized video game at The Strong museum.

And in the steamy butterfly garden in another wing of the museum, Janet Natalello of Irondequoit takes a "staycation" day with fiancé Jeff Marapese and their children catching fluttering butterflies and exploring a tropical indoor jungle.



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"I love coming here with the kids," said McNeal. "It is a one-stop [shop](#). And when we have guests in town, I bring them here."

The International Museum of Play at The Strong is one of the region's biggest tourist attractions. Nearly 600,000 people a year visit the museum, 30 percent of them from outside the Rochester area.

"We really are a big tourism draw," said Suzanne Seldes, vice president of marketing and communications at The

Strong. "For many years in a row now, we have hosted guests from all 50 states and all over the world. I hope this year I can say we have every continent — I think we are close."

McNeal, Natalello and other visitors are fuel for an economic engine that turns someone's urge to "get away" into dollars that help support local institutions, [businesses](#) and, in the end, family incomes.

Think about an out-of-town visitor spending the day at The Strong. Tickets for a family of four would cost about \$44, which goes to support the museum and pay workers' salaries. On top of that, the family would probably eat at a local restaurant, perhaps stop at one of the malls or another local attraction, [buy](#) gas and spend the night in a local hotel.

From one overnight stay, each dollar spent trickles up and down in the local economy. Tourism supports more than 25,000 jobs and \$506 million in annual worker income in the nine-county Finger Lakes region,

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according to the Center for Governmental Research (CGR).

According to a report by the state Division of Tourism, the economic impact of visitors to Monroe County in 2009, the most recent year for which such statistics are available, was \$887.2 million. For the Finger Lakes region, the figure was \$2.45 billion; for the state, nearly \$46 billion.

"We have a good, strong employment base in tourism, which in this county last year was 14,140 — that's a lot of lives," said Ed Hall, president and CEO of VisitRochester, the official tourism agency for Monroe County. "It's kind of an invisible industry and sometimes when you tell folks that 14,000-plus of their neighbors earn their living through tourism, it makes a difference."

Tourism has been identified as one of several engines for growing the economy by the Finger Lakes Regional Economic Development Council, which is working on a five-year plan. The plan will be presented to state officials in November in a competition for state money with other regions across New York.

Tourism is important for large communities and small in the region because it creates jobs that are accessible to a wide range of people and skill levels. The average pay, according to CGR, is only \$19,868, below the averages of sectors such as advanced manufacturing (\$80,233), higher education (\$64,990) and agriculture and food processing (\$37,439). But in some areas,

tourism is one of the few ways a family can make a living.

"There is a fairly large portion of our region that does not have any traditional industry and folks don't have a lot of opportunity to earn money," said Kent Gardner, CGR president and chief economist. "The tourism sector allows people a way to feed their families without having to move away from their homes and a rural lifestyle they prefer.

"It's the same challenge we have when we try to do job creation in the city of Rochester. On one hand our reflex is to look for high-paying jobs. Unfortunately, many people who are unemployed in Rochester aren't qualified for those high-paying jobs."

Among counties in the Finger Lakes region, Yates is most dependent on tourism employment dollars. The county is home to dozens of wineries and has shoreline on three of the lakes, Keuka, Canandaigua and Seneca. More than 12 percent, or \$23

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million, of labor income in the county comes from tourism, according to a 2009 study by the state Department of Economic Development.

Cynthia Kimble, president of the Finger Lakes Tourism Alliance, based in Penn Yan, represents private and public tourism attractions, businesses and organizations across all the Finger Lakes, a region of about 9,000 square miles and 14 counties. For many communities, she said, tourism is an important economic driver.

"It's our natural beauty, shopping, the wineries, our state parks, there is a whole list that drives it. What's wonderful about the Finger Lakes is the diversity of our **assets** — we have something for everyone here."

But tourism is also an important economic driver for Monroe County. This year's Xerox Rochester International Jazz Festival set an attendance record of 182,000 people, 20,000 more visitors than 2010. The nine-day event featured more than 1,000 artists in 285 concerts. The festival, created in 2000, brings \$12 million to \$15 million a year into the local economy. John Nugent, producer and artistic director, said festival officials tracked ticket sales from 27 states and 13 countries. People drove from as far west as Kansas and flew in from international cities such as Amsterdam.

He said the festival is evidence that the region can be a real tourist destination with the right kind of events and attractions.

"In my opinion you have a Dallas, Texas, here in 30 or 40 years in this region because of the lake, which is a gold resource," Nugent said. "I have nothing but positive things to say about the potential for growth for the future of Rochester. If everybody gets on the same page, which is a challenge, then things can happen."

Much of the tourism **business** depends on the health of the economy. In Monroe County, leisure travel, conventions and conferences are holding up, said VisitRochester's Hall. But there has been a decrease in business travel as companies across the county pull back on expenses. He hopes that will change.

"People still like to buy from people they know. They like to have relationships with vendors," he said. "At some point, the people in boardrooms who said 'let's cut back on travel' are going to say 'oh my goodness, we need to go see our customers.'"

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What the economic development council will be looking at is a plan to grow tourism across the board and across the region. Seldes, at The Strong, said one answer is promoting more overnight stays by packaging attractions and hotels for out-of-town visitors.

"Our region is so rich in places — beautiful waterways and our vineyards and everything else that's here," she said. "You want to make sure they are not just coming for a day trip, but also that they are going to have dinner here and stay at a hotel."

Hall said the good news is that the region already has a good lineup of tourist attractions to link, including the museums, a year-round schedule of festivals and events, amateur athletic venues such as the Sports Center at Monroe Community College, and cultural centers such as the Rochester Broadway Theatre League.

What is needed, Hall said, is more of a hand from the state to attract visitors, especially to upstate regions.

"The one thing that frustrates me and the one thing I'm hoping these economic development councils can do is prevail at the state level to improve the state's branding ... of upstate in particular," he said. "The 'I Love New York' program, at this point, is unfocused. It needs some strong commitment at the state level because brands have to be reinforced or they die."

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Janet Natalello and Jeff Marapese of Irondequoit take a stroll through the indoor Butterfly Garden at The Strong museum, one of the region's biggest tourist attractions with nearly 600,000 visitors a year. Nearly 30 percent of those visitors live outside the area. / JEFFREY BLACKWELL staff photographer

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