

Insider
For July 9, 2008
By Kim Burger

If you happened to catch my last Insider article, you know it focused on the impact of the recent floods and tornados and how we grappled with what to do about the Sturgis Falls Celebration and Cedar Basin Jazz Festival. Now that those events have passed, I would like to thank those of you who came out to celebrate. The festivals were drastically “watered down” but you embraced the Hometown Hero’s theme we uncannily selected months ago. This week I’d like to share some further thoughts about this tragic time and how the tourism bureau has been involved trying to do our part to help us all through it.

I have taken some amazing phone calls over that past several weeks. Since I answer the Tourism Bureau telephone on behalf of all of you, you should know how people from across the country have reached out to “us” to offer hope and assistance. I received a call from a woman in San Diego who recently received assistance from Samaritan’s Purse during a fire in her area. She called to reach out to us and offer whatever she could in the form of airfare, housing in her area – anything at all. A couple traveling the country in their RV scheduled a stop to help out. Another woman representing the national disaster relief committee of the Methodist Church called offering to bring teams of volunteers that could potentially number in the thousands. A youth group came from Colorado and one pastor I spoke with indicated he had a network of 100 people he could divide into teams of ten to mud out homes. The Amvets called to schedule delivery of a semi filled with cleaning supplies and on and on.

These are just a few examples. I feel certain they represent a mere tip of the iceberg. There is also the matter of local callers and our church communities and non-profit organizations who are engaging in relief efforts on a local and national level. Connie Erpelding at Prairie Lakes Church and Todd Taylor from Samaritan’s Purse are now coordinating much of this effort and welcome YOUR continued participation. If you can devote four hours to help, teams are assembled, trained and outfitted every morning and afternoon at the church. Simply call 266-2655 and let them know you are coming.

This outpouring of compassion has, of course, resulted from the massive media coverage our state has received. Another interesting affect of this coverage has spurred several conversations with peers who represent destinations throughout Eastern Iowa. While our dear friends in Cedar Rapids have literally checked their welcome mat at the dry cleaners - they estimate half of their attractions are closed - there’s the matter of the other half who are open and desperately need visitor traffic to sustain them. Our friends in other destinations like Dubuque, Clinton and the Quad Cities are struggling to overcome the perception that the entire state of Iowa is under water and that our roads are still closed to traffic. They are standing ready to welcome visitors who, due the national media, are afraid to come to Iowa. Tourism generates an estimated \$5.8 billion in our state each year and we’re going to need every penny of that!

These conversations have reinforced the importance of our role in communicating with the traveling public and in addition to the telephones, our web sites are an excellent tool. Status of our trails is a great example. We've felt for some time that our trails are a popular attraction for visitors. We've done some limited studies, and a quick scan of license plates at trailheads bears this out, but I was still surprised to take calls from Fort Dodge, Davenport, Des Moines and Omaha last week wondering if they should come or cancel their trip. With input from the parks departments and the mapping skills of INRCOG staff, we now have a trail map posted on our website that illustrates which sections are closed. This map will be updated periodically until everything is open again.

As we strive to serve the interests of those whose lives have turned upside down and those who want to travel and recreate, it all comes down to balance. Here's wishing you the wisdom and clarity to strike the proper balance in your little corner of the world.