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FEATURED

## Downtown draw: Route 66 visitors center drives tourism

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DAVID PROEBER, The Pantagraph

Jeff Woodard, director of marketing and community relations for the McLean County Museum of History, examines display at the museum's Cruisin' with Lincoln on 66 Visitors Center.

BLOOMINGTON — Downtown Bloomington has become a destination for thousands of Route 66 travelers in the first year of the Cruisin' with Lincoln on 66 Visitors Center, and the area is reaping economic benefits.

"These are visitors who have been bypassing our community for years," said Beth Whisman, executive director of the McLean County Museum of History, where the visitors center occupies the first floor. "These are new dollars, new people, and a very new audience to our community."

The visitors center will mark its one-year anniversary with a celebration from noon to 4 p.m. on April 25, including a Route 66-themed performance by the Sound of Illinois Chorus at 12:15 p.m. There will be free admission to the museum.

Since it opened April 25, 2015, more than 16,000 people have visited the center. Of the 3,211 people who signed the guest registry, 311 were international, 933 were from out of state, 892 were not from McLean County and 1,075 were local residents.

The numbers do not reflect a full tourism season because the center opened its doors midseason last year.

"So with a full season ahead and increased marketing, the museum expects the numbers for the 2016 season to outpace those of 2015," said Jeff Woodard, the museum's marketing director.

An Illinois Wesleyan University study conducted last fall showed in just its first four months, the visitors center generated \$332,090 to \$445,050 in visitor spending locally. That dollar figure is much higher today, said Woodard.

"We are thrilled to now have a Route 66 attraction which has already economically impacted our area with increased visitors," said Crystal Howard, director of the Bloomington-Normal Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Mayor Tari Renner said he is pleased with the new center's role in getting Bloomington-Normal more of the Route 66 tourism traffic.

"It's a critical step in the revitalization of downtown Bloomington," he added. "This is one of the reasons why we have someone willing to invest \$53 million in our downtown to build a hotel, conference center and parking deck."

The international visitors were from 42 nations, ranging from China and Germany to Bulgaria and Yemen.

"Whether it is hitchhiking Chinese students experiencing the vintage Pepsi machine or a group from Switzerland looking for unique local items like Funks Grove Maple Sirup, travelers are finding their way here and learning about what the community has to offer," Woodard said.

In addition to linking Route 66 to local Abraham Lincoln sites, the center is also introducing visitors to local products and businesses such as Beich candy, Beer Nuts and the Steak 'n Shake restaurant chain, which was founded in 1934 in Normal.

"That's not the only thing we want to do, but we've become a distribution point for local products and that's a direct economic impact," said Woodard.

Surveys filled out by 210 visitors said 72 percent also wanted to go to restaurants in downtown Bloomington. The visitors said they also wanted to visit theaters, parks, music venues, art galleries, Miller Park Zoo and other Route 66 sites.

Museum staff routinely walk visitors to nearby restaurants and called ahead to make reservations for travelers, said Woodard.

"I love that my restaurant is so close," said Kelly Mathy who owns Kelly's Bakery & Cafe, 116 N. Center St. with her husband, Jamie.

"(The visitors center) has gotten a lot of traffic, which is keeping the downtown more vibrant with families who are coming there as a destination," said Mathy. "It's definitely a destination location. They are coming there."

"That is something that we're hoping will go beyond our immediate neighborhood because there are Route 66 sites in Normal and throughout McLean County," added Whisman.

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