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Guest Column:

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Ohio Must Continue to Grow Its Tourism Industry, Even After Record-Setting Year

In 2022, Ohio's tourism industry generated \$53 billion in visitor spending, the state's highest ever. Even with this record-setting year, we need to continue to grow this industry due to Ohio's robust economic growth setting it on pace to have more jobs than people in the state to fill them. Investing and putting focus on economic development related to Ohio's travel and tourism efforts are a great way to help grow the population and fill open jobs.

The Ohio Chamber recently released our *Blueprint for Ohio's Economic Future*, a report that analyzes Ohio's economic outlook and compares it to other states'. In creating this report, we identified six key areas for improvement, including "Sense of Place."

Sense of Place reflects the characteristics and resources that make a community a desirable place to live, work and visit. Investing in Ohio's tourism and travel industry is an integral part of creating a strong sense of place that will keep Ohioans here and attract newcomers to our state. In the *Blueprint*, we highlight that it is equally as important that economic development policies focus on investing in amenities and quality of life in Ohio as it is that they invest in business attraction.

One of the ways the *Blueprint* recommends improvement in sense of place is by capitalizing on those many unique amenities the state has by analyzing the most impactful R.O.I. for amenities and natural environment in set areas. It urges us to find the most impactful attractions, opportunities and gaps in these amenities and reevaluate resources based on which features make the greatest impact on tourism, migration and sense of place.

Ohio has great parks, museums, libraries and other amenities that we must continue to invest in to grow the state's sense of place. Investing in these amenities will help build qualities in the state that enhance the lives of current residents and that attract potential new citizens. Those qualities include a vibrant culture, sense of community and strong natural environments.

The state has already begun a forward movement in this process by investing more in Ohio's parks, with a more than \$150 million increase in investments toward state parks from 2018-2019 to 2020-2021. According to the Trust for Public Land, in 2022, Ohio had 4 cities rank top 60 among the top 100 largest U.S. cities based on their park systems, including Cleveland, Toledo, Columbus and Cincinnati, which ranked number 4.

The many amenities of the state provide a natural marketing tool for attracting new Ohio citizens, but physical advertising is just as important. According to the Ohio Department of Development, their visitation ads combined with a trip to Ohio more than doubled a person's impression of Ohio as a good place to live, start a business and more.

Tourism in Ohio is a growing industry. Ohio saw a 6% increase in tourism visits from 2021 to 2022 and a 3% increase in tourism-supported jobs, totaling up to 233 million tourism visits and 424,339 tourism-supported jobs. These are great numbers, and the Ohio Chamber looks to help Ohio's travel and tourism industry continue to grow.

To lead that effort, the Ohio Chamber recently hired former Ohio Tourism Director Matt MacLaren as its new Director of Travel and Tourism Policy and created the new Ohio Chamber of Commerce Travel and Tourism Committee, which Matt will help lead. The committee's first meeting was held on August 16 with 50 Ohio tourism leaders attending. They will meet quarterly, with the next meeting occurring on November 28.

The committee will help Ohio's travel and tourism industry achieve recognition from the statewide level and will work to attract more visitors to the state, which will lead to more new citizens and workers. The committee will help put into action recommendations from the *Blueprint* on how to improve the sense of place in Ohio. The committee is open to all Ohio Chamber members at the Advocate membership level or above who are involved in Ohio's travel and tourism industry. Many resourceful partner associations of the Chamber are a part of the committee, including the Ohio Hotel & Lodging Association, the Ohio Association of Convention and Visitor Bureaus, the Ohio Restaurant Association and the Ohio Travel Association.

Ohio public officials and economic development groups must find ways to develop dining, shopping and other commercial opportunities to enhance natural amenities around the state to add on to the already countless places that make people fall in love with Ohio—places like the shores of Lake Erie, Hocking Hills State Park and the many notable cities and college towns throughout the state.

We must continue to invest in and develop the state of Ohio's tourism industry, not just to attract visitors and future residents but also to strengthen the sense of place for all current and future Ohioans.

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