



Annual Report | Fiscal Year 2026



FY 2026'S *Top Ten Achievements*

1. Propelled hotel/motel taxes to **\$3.332 million**, the **third-highest** collected by the city.
2. Secured **\$160,000 in grants** in FY 26 - \$5,000 more than FY 25 .
 - » \$75,000 grant through the **Iowa Regional Sports Authority District** program.
 - » \$50,000 **Iowa West Foundation** grant to attract and retain sporting events.
 - » \$25,000 **Union Pacific Railroad** grant to promote the 2026 Railroad Days.
 - » \$10,000 **Iowa Tourism Office** grant to support the 2026 winter marketing campaign.
3. **Achieved the 2025 Nebraska PRSA Paper Anvil Award of Merit** for the **rebranding** of the Council Bluffs CVB to **Unleash Council Bluffs**.
4. Set **records for unique visitor traffic to UNleashCB.com** for **five consecutive months**, February—June, 2026. What's more, visitors **surpassed 50,000 in a month** for the first time in **May and June**.
5. **Grew website event submissions by 783 or 42.7%**, from 1,835 in FY 25 to 2,618 in FY 26 - **another record high**.
6. **Captured stunning ground and aerial video and still photography** of 89.7 The River's 30th Anniversary Concert on July 12, 2025 to use in promoting **Council Bluffs' exceptional live music scene**.
7. Helped **underwrite the General Dodge & the Transcontinental Railroad documentary**, which premiered on **Iowa PBS** in June and **will be distributed nationally**.
8. **Generated 7,293 hotel room nights**, resulting in **\$861,104.67 of economic impact** from nine sporting events in FY 26—**7.9 percent more than anticipated**.
9. Realized **triple-digit percentage increases** (131 and 213) in **welcome center visitors year-over-year in May and June**, following the April installation of interstate signage.
10. **Earned three statewide tourism awards** from the Iowa Travel Industry Partners Foundation.
 - » **Only in Iowa Award** - Union Pacific Railroad Museum
 - » **Arts, Culture, & Heritage Award** - Pottawattamie Arts Culture & Entertainment
 - » **Joe Taylor Vision Award** - Mark Eckman



Unleashing FLOWER POWER

No one driving on South Expressway can miss the transformation that has occurred with the exterior of the Unleash Council Bluffs office. Native plants and pollinators cover the building, reflecting the plantings and insects that encircle it from spring through fall.

Since 2022, Unleash CB has step-by-step converted the lawn around its office from grass to native plants. This serves three important purposes. First, the property is more sustainable, requiring less water and other inputs. Second, it supports pollinators, such as bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds, that are so critical to our ecosystem. Finally, it's an example of how businesses can be more eco-friendly and stand out while doing so.

The mural celebrates native plants and pollinators while drawing attention to the Iowa Welcome Center contained inside. Not to mention, the building finally looks less like a bank for the first time since we purchased it in 2018.

This past year, the organization unleashed more than flower power. As noted on page two, we increased the UnleashCB.com event calendar by 42.7 percent, earned three more statewide tourism awards, and realized noteworthy growth in welcome center visitors. Not to mention, the organization's rebranding as Unleash Council Bluffs received the 2025 Nebraska PRSA Paper Anvil Award of Merit.

While our program of work evolves to keep up with the latest travel industry trends, we remain focused on attracting new customers for local businesses and new taxpayers for local government, both ultimately benefiting all local residents. Visitors represented more than \$334 million in direct spending in Pottawattamie County during 2024, according to Tourism Economics.

As we have stated before, Unleash Council Bluffs endeavors every day to deliver value to the City of Council Bluffs that exceeds, many times over, the dollars invested in us. Thank you once again for that investment.



Ashley Kruse
Board President



LEADERSHIP

Board President - Ashley Kruse: City of Council Bluffs

Board Vice President - Arian Haddix: Fox Creek Fundraising

Vanessa Dobles: Union Pacific Railroad Museum

Len Friedenbach: Country Inn & Suites

Matt Johnson: Barley's Bar & Grill / Railway Inn

Brian Shea: Pottawattamie County Board of Supervisors

Bill Vanderpool: Holiday Inn Hotel & Suites / Hampton Inn & Suites @ Ameristar

TEAM

Mark Eckman: Executive Director

Craig Carlsen: Director of Marketing

Sophie Kohler: Content Coordinator

Kathy Rosene: Director of Sales

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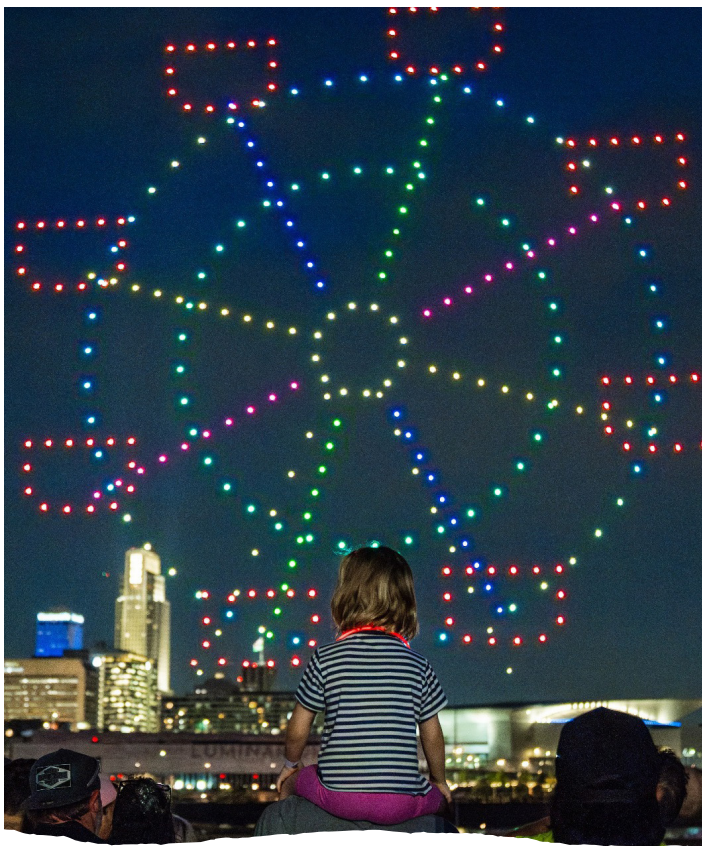
UNLEASHCB.COM

FY 26 *sets Records* FOR ONLINE USERS & EVENTS

During fiscal year 2026, enticing digital ads, social content, and messaging spurred online users to visit UNleashCB.com in larger numbers than ever before. Event submissions also set a new high.

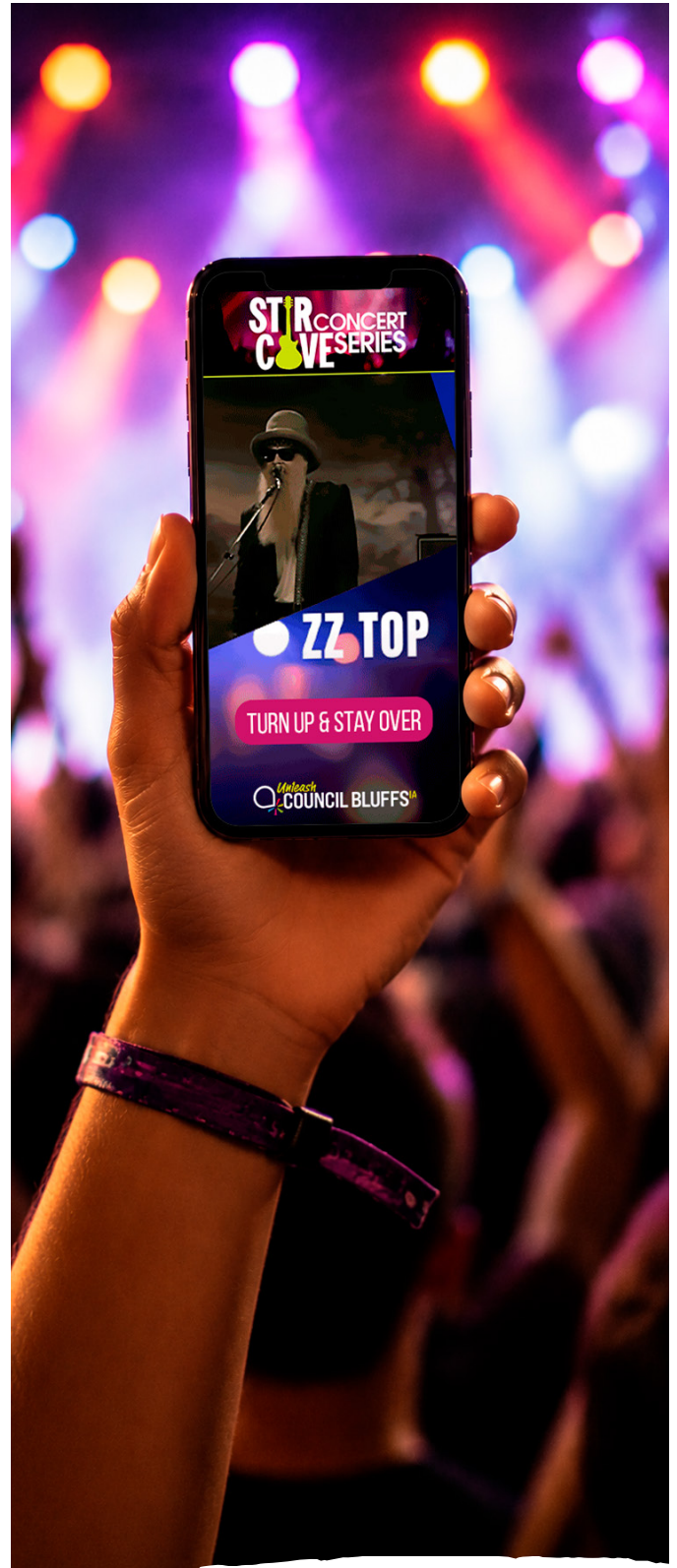
EVENT SUBMISSIONS *Surge* BY 42.7 PERCENT

How many times have you heard there's nothing to do? Anyone who states that hasn't visited the UNleashCB.com event calendar. In fiscal year 2026, event submissions grew by 783 to a record high of 2,618 events featured on the website. That equates to 50 events per week or seven per day in Pottawattamie County.



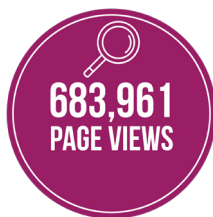
MESSAGE PILLARS

1. Unmatched railroad history
2. Singular outdoor experiences + natural landscapes
3. Exceptional live music performances
4. One-of-a-kind public, visual, and performing arts
5. Superior sports facilities + fields
6. Unique nightlife, entertainment districts + historic neighborhoods



Unprecedented FIVE-MONTH STRETCH FOR UNLEASHCB.COM

Unique website visitors hit record numbers for five consecutive months, February – June 2026, driving UNleashCB.com to a new record number for annual web visitors with 378,490. This is the first year that website users surpassed 50,000 during a month, as they did in May and June.



Note: FY26 year-over-year comparisons reflect updated analytics filters that remove inauthentic traffic. As a result, some FY25 baseline metrics differ from those previously reported for FY25.



SOCIAL MESSAGING *Drives Interest*



UNLEASH CB PARTNERS WITH *Leading Digital Marketing Firm*

Fiscal year 2026 saw Unleash Council Bluffs begin working with Sojern, a firm that specializes in digital travel marketing for destinations around the globe. While it has an international reach, Sojern has a Midwestern sensibility, being headquartered in Omaha. The partnership began on July 1, 2025, from which two marketing campaigns have been executed, summer and fall 2025, as well as spring and summer 2026.

SUMMER + FALL INITIATIVE JULY 1 – OCTOBER 31, 2025

Investment	\$40,000
Impressions	5,214,370
Clicks	6,606
Page Views	13,005



SPRING + SUMMER INITIATIVE MARCH 10 – JUNE 30, 2026

Investment	\$40,000
Impressions	5,794,258
Clicks	107,194
Page Views	82,454



CITY, RURAL, COUNTY, & STATE *Collaborate* ON WINTER MARKETING

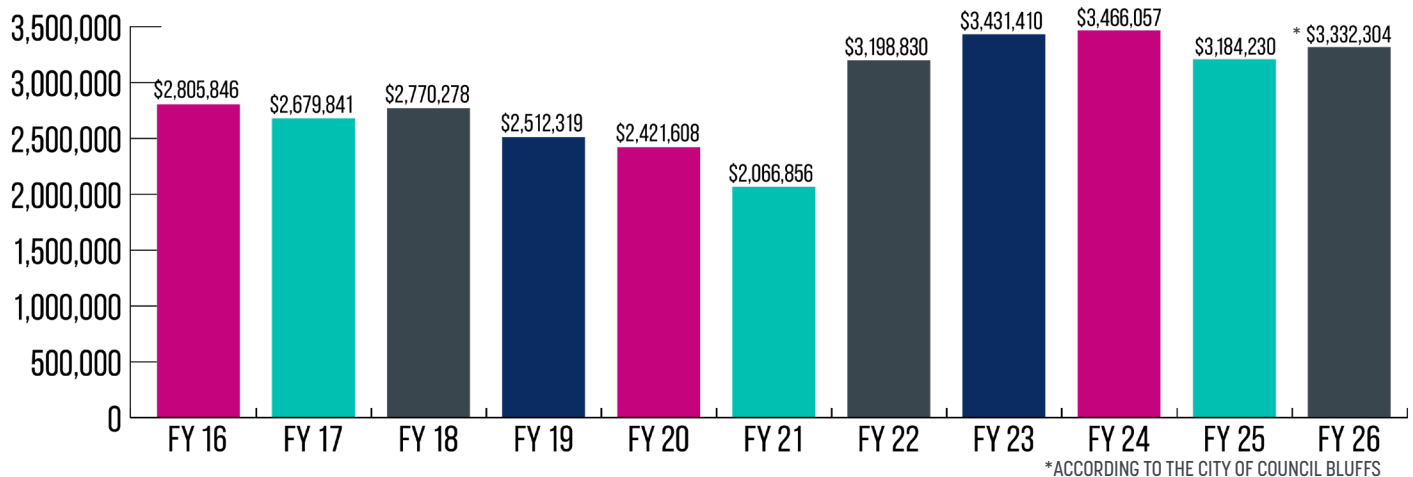
With the assistance of a \$10,000 Iowa Tourism Grant, Unleash CB worked with Pottawattamie Conservation, Western Iowa Development Association, and the Pottawattamie Tourism Committee to execute the fourth consecutive winter marketing campaign. It leveraged interest in Crescent Hill at Hitchcock and resulted in the FY 26 metrics outperforming the year prior.



WINTER INITIATIVE JANUARY 2 – FEBRUARY 28, 2026

Investment	\$20,000
Impressions	1,237,041
Clicks	20,771
Page Views	31,157

H/M TAXES + GRANTS + VISITOR DOLLARS = *Big Impact*



FY 26 HOTEL/MOTEL TAX COLLECTIONS REACH *Third-Highest Total*

In fiscal year 2026, hotel/motel taxes totaled \$3,332,304*, easily surpassing last year and becoming the third-most collected. During the past five years, lodging taxes have provided \$16,612,831 in city revenue.

FY 26 GRANT *Awards Grow* BY \$5,000 TO \$160,000

Unleash Council Bluffs received \$160,000 in grant awards during FY 26 compared to \$155,000 in FY 25. The Regional Sports Authority District (RSAD) grant program approved \$75,000 to support nine tournaments. That represents the 19th consecutive sports grant received from the State of Iowa. The Iowa West Foundation played a big part in landing the RSAD funding. The foundation contributed a \$50,000 grant to supplement the local match. Additional event support came from a \$25,000 Union Pacific Railroad grant to help promote the 2026 Railroad Days. Furthermore, the Iowa Tourism Office underwrote the 2026 winter travel marketing initiative with a \$10,000 grant.



VISITOR SPENDING TOTALS *\$3 Billion* OVER THE PAST TEN YEARS

New customers (visitors traveling at least 50 miles) added \$334.17 million in direct spending to the Pottawattamie County economy during 2024, according to Tourism Economics. Over a 10-year span, 2015-2024, travel expenditures totaled \$3,054,410,000 in the county as per data from the US Travel Association and Tourism Economics.



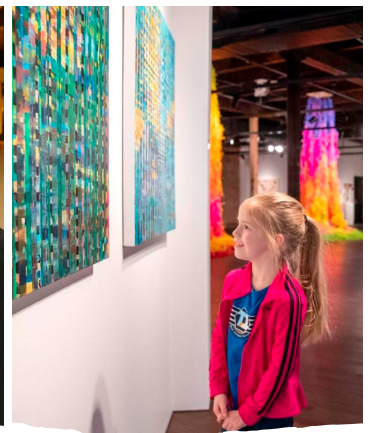
30TH ANNIVERSARY CONCERT UNDERSCORES CB'S *Live Music Scene*

89.7 The River celebrated its 30th anniversary with a nine-hour music marathon that drew a crowd of 8,000 attendees to Tom Hanafan River's Edge Park. Local favorite Anchondo kicked off the concert, followed by a stacked lineup featuring The Urge, Blue October, Sublime, and iconic headliners 311. Unleash Council Bluffs took full advantage of the outstanding musical talent, along with unusually mild weather, to capture stunning ground and aerial footage to use in promoting Council Bluffs' extraordinary live music scene.



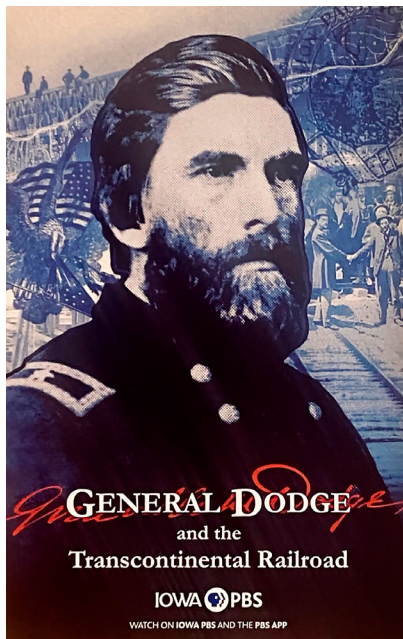
CB TOURISM EFFORTS RECEIVED THREE *statewide Awards*

Iowa Travel Industry Partners (iTIP), the leading statewide association of the tourism industry, bestowed three of its 18 iTIP awards on Council Bluffs honorees at a ceremony held on June 9 in Amana, Iowa. The Union Pacific Railroad Museum was selected for the 2026 Only in Iowa Tourism Award for telling one of the most nationally significant stories to originate in the state: Iowa's role as the starting point of the transcontinental railroad. The second honoree, the Pottawattamie Arts, Culture, & Entertainment (PACE) received the 2026 Arts, Culture & Heritage Tourism Award for its exceptional work in advancing cultural tourism in western Iowa. The third iTIP award went to Unleash Council Bluffs executive director Mark Eckman. He received a statewide tourism leadership honor, the Joe Taylor Vision Award, recognizing his work over a 39-year career.



IOWA PBS SPOTLIGHTS *General Dodge* FOR AMERICA'S 250

Few individuals have impacted the American West more than General Grenville Dodge and his role with the transcontinental railroad. Given that history, it made sense for Iowa PBS to pursue a documentary about this consequential American during the country's 250th anniversary. In doing so, they reached out to potential underwriters to help cover the film's cost. Unleash Council Bluffs agreed to a sponsorship that not only supported the project but also promoted Council Bluffs. On June 9, 2026, the documentary premiered at the Hoff Family Arts & Culture Center to a packed house, which gave the screening a huge thumbs-up. It went on to debut on Iowa PBS on June 15, but the story doesn't end there. The Dodge's story is being offered to American Public Television for national distribution in October



SPORTS GENERATED *More Impact* IN FY 26 THAN ANTICIPATED

With the generous support of the State of Iowa and Iowa West Foundation, Unleash Council Bluffs provided sponsorships to nine tournaments, resulting in 7,869 room nights worth \$861,104.67 to CB hotels, 7.9 percent more than expected. The events reflected a variety of sports, including fishing, soccer, volleyball, basketball, baseball, and four wrestling competitions. Two of the nine were national championship caliber.



CELEBRATING *Tourism's Best* ACROSS THE METRO

Since 2017, Visit Omaha and Unleash Council Bluffs have collaborated to present the Omaha Metropolitan Area Tourism Awards to the best attraction, hotel, retail business, and restaurant in Douglas and Pottawattamie counties.

The 2026 Pottawattamie County winners included: Best Hotel - Judge Richard Distillery Airbnb, Best Attraction - Arrowhead Park, Best Retail Business - Central Perch, and Best Restaurant - Back Forty Bar & Grill. Three of the four were located in the rural part of the county. The winners are determined by visitors and locals over the course of a nomination and voting process, with 7,000 votes determining the award recipients.

The honorees were celebrated during National Travel & Tourism Week, May 3-9. That week, award recipients were recognized at a Council Bluffs City Council study session and a Pottawattamie County Board of Supervisors meeting, at which both issued proclamations regarding NTTW. In addition, videos of the award recipients revealed the honorees to a broader audience via social media.



FREQUENT FLIERS *Welcomed* TO OMA + CB

In addition to the tourism awards, another metro collaboration is the Eppley Airfield (OMA) visitor information kiosk located near luggage claim. For the past several years, Unleash Council Bluffs has partnered with Visit Omaha to sponsor the expense of maintaining the airport kiosk. With the construction of an entirely new terminal, a brand-new kiosk will be built to serve travelers as they pick up their bags and look for area information. Along with Omaha and Sarpy County info, they will find Council Bluffs guides in the brochure racks. The adjacent image depicts how the new kiosk will look when completed.



CB'S *Latest Mural*: UNLEASHING FLOWER POWER

Murals have become a popular and meaningful way to celebrate Council Bluffs' heritage, landscape, and mindset – unlike anywhere else, on purpose! Unleash Council Bluffs has joined that cause in a big way in 2026 by commissioning a mural to be painted on the exterior of its office, no less.

Unleash CB looked no further than the creativity exhibited in the FIRST AVE murals. Two FIRST AVE artists were contacted to request proposals. Betni Kalk of Tumusini Art, LLC was selected, and she created a mural design incorporating native plant and pollinator species found among the native flowers surrounding the Unleash CB office. While not a native plant nor pollinator, even a black squirrel made its way into the mural.

To complement the artwork, three interpretive panels will be designed to inform residents and visitors about the native plants and pollinators found on both the property and mural. They will be positioned in locations around the building to inform the audience as to the different species common during spring, summer, and fall. Ashley Kruse's letter on page three spoke to the importance of supporting this fragile ecosystem. The mural, landscape, and panels come together to drive home that message.



NEW SIGNAGE *Steers Visitors* TO CB WELCOME CENTER

In January 2022, the Iowa Tourism Office approved Unleash Council Bluffs' request to replace the Western Historic Trails Center as an official Iowa Welcome Center following the WHTC's closure in 2021. In April 2026, the Iowa Department of Transportation installed three interstate signs on the local lanes of I-80/29 for traffic going in each direction. (The delay was due to the widespread damage the August 2020 derecho inflicted on highway signage across the state.) What an immediate difference that made. Visitors soared by triple-digit percentages in May and June 2026, by 131% and 213%, respectively.





OUR MISSION

Unleash Council Bluffs serves as a catalyst to grow Pottawattamie County's visitor economy through collaborative sales and marketing, destination advocacy, and sustainable placemaking activities in order to enhance the region's quality of life.

Unleash Council Bluffs is funded by the City of Council Bluffs from a portion of the hotel/motel taxes generated by travelers. This support allows the organization to promote CB as a destination for visitors to enjoy the city's hotels, restaurants, attractions, venues, and events. Visitors serve as new customers for local businesses and new taxpayers for local government, benefiting all local residents.