

A One-of-a-Kind Visitor Experience

BY DEBBIE LOCKE-DANIEL

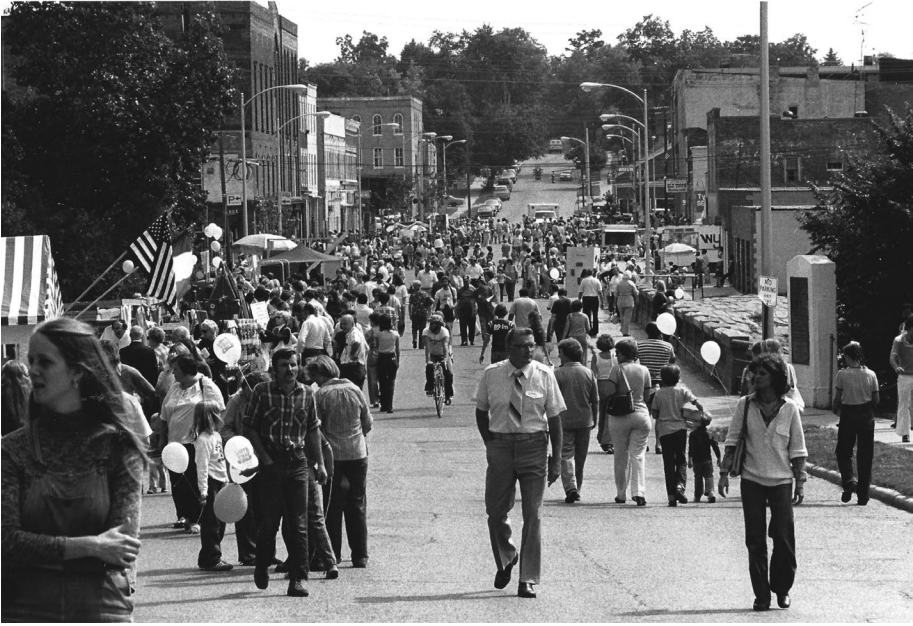
Convention and Visitors Bureau

In 1974, state representative Gary Owen was approached by a few local hoteliers and asked if he would facilitate a mandatory hotel-bed tax under Public Act 263. It would be collected by the county treasurer and then distributed to a Washtenaw County Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB). It would serve as the marketing and sales arm for area hotels, motels, and other tourism venues, with oversight by the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners. Representative Owen agreed but only if Ypsilanti had its own CVB. This resulted in the distribution of the tax monies as follows: based on population and location, 25% to the City of Ypsilanti and Ypsilanti Township and 75% to the rest of Washtenaw County.

To avoid duplication of effort it was unofficially decided that the Ann Arbor CVB would focus more on sales for the destination and the Ypsilanti CVB would promote and manage a variety of local annual events, with a smaller focus on sales.

For many years, the Ypsilanti CVB put on the popular Ypsilanti Heritage Festival. Events within the festival included the Flying Wallendas family trapeze act, historic encampments, a log rolling competition on the Huron River, a circus, numerous craft and food vendors, music and gambling tents, and nonprofit booths.

The Ypsilanti CVB both organized and promoted a Festival of Lights in Riverside Park, during the holidays; Gus Macker basketball tournaments; numerous car shows in Depot Town and Riverside Park, including the Orphan Car Show; the Frog Island Jazz Festival; the Volkswagen Show; the Camaro Superfest; the Ton Up Motorcycle and Music Festival; The Michigan Elvisfest; the Color Run; the Michigan Firehouse Museum's Fire Truck Muster; Thunder Over Michigan; and much more.



Ypsilanti Heritage Festival, 1979

A Change in Direction

Not long before I was hired as director of the Ypsilanti CVB, the board decided that the bureau would only become a marketing partner for local events, and it would no longer be responsible for their management. This followed the national model for destination marketing organizations. However, this meant that the long running Ypsilanti Heritage Festival had to form its own 501c3 and board of directors. This was accomplished under the oversight of local champion the late Nathalie Edmonds and friends.

Initially, both the Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti CVBs collected a 2% tax on each occupied-room night throughout Washtenaw County. The PA 263 legislation allowed up to a 5% tax if approved by the county's board of commissioners. For the destination of Ypsilanti to remain competitive, it was decided to increase the local tax to 5%. This was successfully lobbied by both the Ann Arbor and the Ypsilanti bureaus. With the recommendation of the Washtenaw County Hotel and Motel Association, the change was approved by the commissioners. The additional revenue allowed both CVBs to take their marketing efforts to a new level.

With an increased budget, the Ypsilanti CVB was able to accomplish some new initiatives. The additional marketing and sales staff included the installation of signage throughout both Ypsilanti and Ypsilanti Township. The bureau's staff successfully applied to become certified in all national best practices, as defined by Destinations

International in Washington D.C. The bureau attained this certification after an intensive year-long effort. Ypsilanti CVB chief operating officer Mary Zucchero and I both became destination marketing executives through Destinations International.

In 2014, an exciting branding campaign was launched with a local company, Phire. Under their oversight and with the input of numerous local stakeholders, “YpsiReal” emerged and was fully integrated through the Ypsilanti community. It remains in place today. A “PURE Michigan” radio commercial campaign for Ypsilanti and surrounding communities was released as well.

An annual matching grant program called CTAP (Community Tourism Area Program) was also created for all Washtenaw County communities (Ypsilanti, Ypsilanti Township, Milan, Saline, Dexter, Chelsea, and Manchester), with the exception of Ann Arbor. This program offered each community an opportunity to receive up to a \$10,000 grant for a defined program that enhanced or grew their tourism product in their community. It included a detailed application and reporting process. All communities took advantage of it and many successful projects were completed! These included everything from new annual events to art installations to enhanced signage in their communities.

Through the years, the Ypsilanti CVB successfully partnered with the Ann Arbor CVB on numerous programs, marketing campaigns, and an annual visitors guide. These partnerships included one of the largest and most lucrative groups coming to our county which were the Plumbers and the Pipefitters annual training program held at Washtenaw Community College. They were followed by the both the IBEW (Electrical Union) and Ironworkers training programs. These three clients generated millions of dollars of economic impact each summer to the local economy and continue to do so.

In 2015, the Washtenaw Board of Commissioners voted to merge all county CVBs into one organization known as “Destination Ann Arbor.” This decision elicited mixed



Orphan Car Show Judge Ron Pinsoneault inspects a 1953 Hudson, 2016

emotions and some aggressive push back from the Ypsilanti CVB staff, board of directors, and many members of the Ypsilanti community. But the Ypsilanti Area Convention and Visitors Bureau had no choice but to disband. The local office has been retained and Destination Ann Arbor continues to promote the eastern part of the county.

Looking Back

I can only imagine that all those years ago in 1974, Representative Owens knew that Ypsilanti had such unique character and so many wonderful assets from Eastern Michigan University, great museums, unique events, historic architecture, Depot Town, downtown shops and restaurants to the beautiful Riverside and Frog Island Parks that he felt it warranted its own DMO or destination marketing organization. I totally agree and am proud to say that the highlight of my career was to end it with fifteen years of working with a rock star talented and dedicated staff, a supportive and talented board of directors and community champions that defied any I have ever known.

A Note on Sources

Facts, dates, and figures were drawn from both the memory and experience of the author, Debbie Locke-Daniel and her materials retained from her employment such as visitor guides and annual reports. Images are provided by the Ypsilanti Historical Society Archives.

About the Author

Debbie Locke-Daniel served as Executive Director of the Ypsilanti Area Convention and Visitors Bureau from 2000 until her retirement in 2015. In the Bureau's forty-one-year history, she was the longest serving director and its final director before it was merged with the Ann Arbor CVB.