

Segue: SIUE alumnus enhances regional tourism

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Tourism plays an important role in the success of regions throughout the world. Positioned on 2,660 acres of beautiful woodland atop the bluffs that overlook the natural beauty of the Mississippi River's rich bottom land, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and its surrounding areas are rich in historical landmarks, attractions and recreational activities available just outside the campus.

On this week's episode of Segue, SIUE Chancellor Randy Pembroke, Ph.D., interviews Brett Stawar, president of the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau, formerly known as the Alton Regional Convention and Visitors Bureau. The Bureau serves Alton, Grafton, Edwardsville and Collinsville, as well as other communities in Madison, Jersey and Calhoun Counties.

Segue will air at 9 a.m. on Sunday, March 31 on

WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound and siue.edu/wsie.

Stawar previously served as chair of the Illinois Council of Convention & Visitors Bureau. He is an SIUE alumnus, who earned a master's in communications in 2005 after earning a bachelor's in public relations from Illinois State University. He also is an adjunct professor at Lewis and Clark Community College.

"You work hard to get the word out about tourism in our area, and I understand you have been traveling quite a bit," Pembroke says. "Can you tell our listeners about your recent trips?"

"Recently, we rebranded and changed our name to Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau, which is reflective of the famous Route 66 phenomenon, as well as the Great River Road," Stawar says. "This is the only place in America where those two historic roads come together.

"We have been partnering more and more with the state of Illinois, and are able to go on national and international sales missions with a few other key bureaus, such as Chicago, Springfield and Galena."

The bureau leaders have taken international trips to build awareness of the tourism assets available in their regions. On a trip earlier this year, Stawar visited Beijing and Shanghai in China, and met with officials and business leaders from Amazon and Expedia primarily to speak about travel, inviting them to the United States to experience Route 66. The bureau also maintains relationships with the United Kingdom, Germany and Canada.

"In a couple of weeks, we will be heading to Zürich, Switzerland and Frankfurt, Germany for sales trips," Stawar says. "Other travel influencers will be joining us on a bus tour to witness the 'Route 66 Experience'

firsthand. We'll pick up a group in Litchfield and travel downstate to visit Alton, Edwardsville, and even see the Cahokia Mounds in Collinsville."

At Cahokia Mounds, visitors will see the remnants of the largest civilization in the continent, built in the Mississippi River Valley around 1300 A.D. The story continues through the eras of time with the inception of Route 66 and the importance of the Industrial Revolution all the way to present day.

"We are slowly, but surely getting out of the winter season and headed into spring," Pembroke says. "Is this a time for a lot of inquiries at the bureau? Also, what do you have coming up this spring and summer?"

"It seems that we have a variety of seasons in our area—spring, summer, fall, winter and eagle season — which is, in and of itself, a different campaign. In Alton, we also have a haunted season, as well as a holiday season. Our campaigns focus around the seasonal possibilities in the region.

"Our new spring guide outlines plenty of activities for visitors and local families to do throughout the area. You can shake off those winter blues by hitting the trails in northern Madison and Jersey Counties. A lot of heritage events are coming up in the near future, and this summer, Grafton will open its new SkyTour shuttle."

The gondola-inspired attraction is catching buzz from both state and international visitors. Riders can take the shuttle from the base of the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers' confluence, and travel up to the bluffs to Aerie's Resort. The Grafton SkyTour is expected to take its first trek up the bluffs after Memorial Day.

To hear what else is happening around the region, tune in to the full episode at 9 a.m. on Sunday, March 31, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound and siue.edu/wsie.