

## A Modest Proposal: Merge Quad Cities First and the Convention & Visitors Bureau

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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At [the public unveiling last month of Quad Cities First](#) - the chamber-of-commerce-controlled replacement for the Quad City Development Group - I ran into Sean O'Harrow, the executive director of the Figge Art Museum.

His presence was a bit of a surprise, given that arts and culture are too rarely mentioned in the same breath as economic development in the Quad Cities. (They weren't mentioned at the debut of Quad Cities First.)

There's a reason for that: The establishment's conception of "economic development" is usually limited to luring employers to our community to create jobs (or at least move them from somewhere else). And the discussion is typically restricted to issues such as tax climate, transportation infrastructure, direct incentives, and workforce.

Yet, as O'Harrow pointed out, a community's culture is essential to attracting people - be they CEOs, workers, or tourists. And he and I wondered whether cultural marketing had been given any consideration as DavenportOne and the Illinois Quad City Chamber of Commerce took control of external economic-development marketing through Quad Cities First.

The answer, to the surprise of nobody: not really.

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That oversight can't be corrected, so let's move into third-rail territory and suggest something truly radical: the long-term goal of a merger of Quad Cities First with the Quad Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau, creating genuinely unified external marketing with a holistic view of the area - not just business opportunities, but *life*.

"We are one and the same," said Quad Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau President and CEO Joe Taylor. Asked whether these two types of marketing should be separate in the long run, Taylor was unequivocal: "No, I don't think they should be. Tourism is economic development, and economic development is tourism. ... I think a single message from the Quad Cities and a brand ... would be highly beneficial."

But "structurally, we've established some differences between economic-development structures and tourism structure," he said. (Taylor was not advocating for a merger; he was responding to specific questions about whether "economic development" and "cultural" marketing were fundamentally different.)

Admittedly, there are plenty of logistical and territorial barriers that would prevent such a massive reorganization of community-advocacy assets. Dismantling the Quad City Development Group to build Quad Cities First was a huge task, and it's indicative of the sensitivity and possessiveness involved that the Bettendorf Chamber of Commerce agreed to "endorse" the new concept but not to be swallowed by the newly created Iowa Quad City Chamber of Commerce. So throwing the Quad Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau on top of that was not going to happen.

Furthermore, economic-development and tourism marketing are funded differently - the former through public and private contributions, and the latter through hotel/motel taxes.

And, in fairness to the people behind Quad Cities First, Taylor said cultural organizations have a lot of work to do. When I asked him whether the Quad Cities' economic-development structures paid enough attention to the arts, he quickly replied: "Ask the arts community as well: Have they paid enough attention to economic development? ... The arts groups need to realize that they need to be marketing. They need to be involved in economic development. If the arts groups are only marketing locally ... they're probably not being part of economic development as much

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as they ... need to be."

For example, Taylor said, the Putnam Museum is planning an aviation exhibit in July 2010. "Why don't they start in June and partner with the [Quad City] Air Show, and talk to Bruce Carter at the airport?" he suggested. "That's what I need the arts community doing. I need the arts community producing packages that the bureau or whoever can then take out into the marketplace."

Taylor also said arts and cultural organizations need to be proactive in terms of cooperation: "I see the day coming when funders in the community will say to the arts organizations the same thing that they're saying to the economic-development organizations now: We want regionalism, we don't want you duplicating, we want you working together, we want you thinking things through if you want to keep getting our funds. That's the wake-up call that I think may be coming ... . We should have a plan to avoid that happening."

Taylor this week is re-starting a discussion about cooperation among arts groups with a ["community arts marketing discussion" on Wednesday, August 26](#)

So while Quad Cities First finds it s feet and Taylor tries to get arts organizations to work more closely with each other, this merger is a fantasy, an idea to explore. Maybe, in five or 10 years, truly coordinated Quad Cities marketing can be discussed as a proposal rather than a concept.

As Taylor noted, things move slowly in the Quad Cities. The community arts marketing discussion resurrects [an idea from five years ago](#) . The [vague threat to de-fund the Development Group was issued three years ago](#) . "We were talking about wayfinding for 10 or 12 years," Taylor said. "Sometimes in the Quad Cities it takes that long."

### Artificial Separation

The business community isn't oblivious to the importance of arts and culture to economic

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development; it's just been preoccupied.

As Steven Bahls, the president of Augustana College and the chair of the Illinois Quad City Chamber of Commerce, said in an interview last week: "The cultural marketing is an important part of developing Quad Cities First, but the discussions were not at the center of what we discussed. The purpose of the discussions among the community leaders was what to do with the Quad City Development Group, given that it was running out of money."

We've known about the importance of culture in economic development for a long time. The culture and recreation features of River Renaissance (which were both publicly and privately funded) were partly pitched as economic development, for example, and the omnipresent word "amenities" is development-speak for arts, culture, and leisure opportunities.

Yet there is this artificial separation between economic development and cultural development, and between the marketing of our communities for economic development and for tourism.

It's certainly true that Quad Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau and Quad Cities First will have different audiences, with one organization targeting individuals and convention groups and the other communicating with business prospects.

Yet there's significant overlap in the *messages*. Both are trying to convince people that there's a vibrant culture here, whether somebody might come for a weekend visit or might move a family or a business here.

And a unified approach should turn visitors into residents and business leaders. Success in cultural marketing for tourism can lead to success in business attraction; a business-relocation decision starts with a visit, after all.

"There is a great potential to work together certainly," Bahls said. He noted that while the organizations' marketing materials might be different, they can share themes.

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Bahls is hinting at the biggest barrier to a merger: Quad Cities First has no apparent interest in becoming one with the Quad Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau, and vice versa.

"The group that formed Quad Cities First looked at the Convention & Visitors Bureau and found that to be a very, very good program," Bahls said. He added that it's "an example of something that works. It is unlikely, in my view, that we'd see a merger of those two."

Taylor saw it as a compliment that his organization was kept out of the Quad Cities First discussion. "I view it as the community giving a great vote of confidence to the Quad Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau that we're already meeting many of the community's goals," he said. "And by that I mean the community views the bureau as one team, we are a regional entity, we are non-duplicative ... , we produce an incredible high positive ROI for our community ... ."

Quad Cities First could be seen as an attempt at the economic-development equivalent of what happened in 1990, when the Davenport, Bettendorf, and Illinois Quad Cities tourism offices merged into the Quad Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau. "Many of the discussions about working together, being one entity, using resources wisely were resolved in the tourism side of things 20 years ago," Taylor said.

Bringing together Quad Cities First and the Quad Cities Convention & Visitors Bureau could be viewed as the next logical step.

The idea that the Convention & Visitors Bureau should be separate merely because it's not dysfunctional goes against the premise of Quad Cities First. Two of that fledgling organization's aims are "comprehensive economic-development strategic planning and funding for the Quad Cities" and "sales and marketing of the Quad Cities region." Nothing there differentiates between "business" and "tourism" economic development, and the word "comprehensive" is by definition all-inclusive.

Taylor said he could envision the day when the community speaks to the outside world not just with one voice, but through one mouthpiece. "I think the Quad Cities is evolving," he said. "And the day could come where Quad Cities First is all-encompassing."

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But he doesn't see that happening anytime soon. "You don't just snap your fingers ... ," he said. "It takes longer to bring everyone to consensus ... ."

And although he was talking about cooperative arts marketing, Taylor said there's often much trial and error involved in figuring out the best way to do something: "We may have to go to the kitchen many, many times to find the recipe that works."

A [Quad Cities First informational meeting](#) will be held on Friday, August 28, at 7:30 a.m. at Centre Station, 1200 River Drive in Moline.