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BENTONVILLE

MUSEUM'S INFLUENCE A WORK OF ART, DESIGN

For decades, the city of Bentonville was a magnet for business executives. They trekked to the northwest Arkansas city to conduct business at the headquarters of one of the world's largest companies based on revenue — Wal-Mart Stores Inc.

But then a new wave of visitors flocked to the city starting in November 2011 thanks to the opening of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. Founded by Alice Walton, daughter of Wal-Mart founder Sam Walton, Crystal Bridges is considered to have one of the most impressive collections of American artwork in the world. The 201,000-SF museum took years to complete and cost more than \$150 million. It sits on 120 wooded acres in the middle of the city.

The Bentonville Convention & Visitor's Bureau responded to the museum opening by beefing up its advertising domestically and internationally to make it as easy as possible for visitors to come to Bentonville.

Its efforts have received rave reviews for the city. Bentonville was named one of *Leisure & Travel* magazine's Hottest Travel Destinations of 2012. It's the current *Arkansas Business* City of Distinction award winner for tourism development in 2012.

"Business travel now combined with leisure travel has put Bentonville on the map as a cultural destination and a place to do business," said Shelli Kerr, planning services manager for Bentonville's Community Development.

To prepare for the visitors, the CVB improved its website and targeted all areas of social media, Kerr said.

"The new website launched in 2011 is much more interactive, helping both CVB staff and visitors find the information they need," Kerr said. "It also includes a trip planning feature."

In the spring of 2012, the CVB unveiled its iPhone app that offers users information about restaurants,

accommodations and things to do in Bentonville.

The CVB also has been working on other projects to help visitors. In 2008, it started a citywide signage program. It paid \$110,000 to Merje Environments & Experience of West Chester, Pa., to create 21 different types of signs.

So far, approximately 250 signs have been bought and installed around the city at a cost of \$700,000, Kerr said.

The project "has been a significant advantage to visitors," she said. "It provides easily recognizable directions to local attractions and identifies such attractions and public parking facilities."

The signage program presents Bentonville as an organized, efficient community that cares about its visitors, Kerr said.

Because of its success, other northwest Arkansas cities are considering the program, she said.

CRYSTAL BRIDGES' IMPACT

Crystal Bridges has attracted thousands of visitors to Bentonville and northwest Arkansas.

"The museum has outpaced its own projections for attendance in the first six months by exceeding its annual estimated attendance of 250,000," Kerr said.

But visitor numbers are only part of the museum's influence.

Bentonville has received more revenue from its taxes on its hotel and motel rooms, she said. That revenue has jumped 6 percent between 2010 and 2011. And it is up 12 percent so far this year, Kerr said.

The museum also triggered the growth of eateries downtown.

Downtown Bentonville Inc., worked with investors to bring in the right mix of restaurants.

Since 2009, five restaurants and several street vendors have opened in downtown, offering

everything from espresso to seafood.

The museum also brought the community together, Kerr said, and Crystal Bridges also sparked more interest in art.

Bentonville ArtsFest, which is held in June, expanded from one week in 2011 to a month of art-related events in 2012. Themes ranged from music, theater, culinary and traditional mediums of paint and sculpture.

"In Bentonville, tourism development is largely guided by the Bentonville Convention & Visitors Bureau," Kerr said. "But it is the teamwork of an entire community that makes Bentonville a place where successful business travel transpires and vacation memories are made." 

