Editorial: Tourist attractions here broad-based

The issue: The Chippewa Valley as a tourist destination.

Our view: We may lack the big attraction, but our list of things to do is steadily growing.

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To steal a sports cliche, when it comes to tourism, the Chippewa Valley is a singles hitter.

That is, the reason folks would visit this area are less obvious than Wisconsin Dells, Green Bay or Hayward. Still, there is enough variety here that Eau Claire ranks highly among its peers in hotel and motel room tax revenues.

A recent report from the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance showed Eau Claire was eighth highest in room tax collections from 2006-10. Eau Claire collects an 8 percent local tax on those who stay in local lodging establishments, and last year that generated more than $1.4 million. About $800,000 of that total funded the Visit Eau Claire convention and visitors bureau, and another $203,400 was used to subsidize the Chippewa Valley Museum, Paul Bunyan Logging Camp, Eau Claire Regional Arts Center and other entities. State law requires that at least 70 percent of room tax revenues be used for tourism promotion and development.

An ongoing debate is whether building — and presumably subsidizing — a large convention center would be a net gain for the community by bringing in bigger gatherings we now lose to other cities that have such facilities.

But the “plus” side of the area's ledger is plentiful. Our proximity to the Twin Cities with a relatively easy drive on Interstate 94 makes us attractive to a potential tourist base numbering in the millions. That's why youth sports tournaments, major music festivals and other weekend getaway activities can draw well. The Metropolis Hotel and its adjoining attractions just off I-94 also get a good chunk of their business from the Twin Cities.

UW-Eau Claire also helps lodging establishments by drawing visitors and parents for the many special events, such as homecoming, graduations and other activities.
But our "pluses" don't end there. An active and growing arts community, the impressive network of recreation trails and parks, the rivers that are increasingly getting noticed by tubers, canoers, etc., and new special events such as a marathon and triathlon also bump up the motel occupancy rate. The Confluence Project, should it become reality, would bring in additional visitors to enjoy a new performing arts center.

U.S. 53 and Highway 29 also bring travelers through the area, and some of them stop to eat or stay. And we have plenty of accommodations: Only six other metro or tourist areas in the state have more guest rooms than the roughly 2,500 we have.

Bit by bit, the Chippewa Valley has developed a nice list of things to do, including the Chippewa Falls area with Leinenkugel's brewery, Irvine Park and Lake Wissota State Park, and the Menomonie area with UW-Stout, the Mabel Tainter Center for the Arts and a number of other destination points.

Giant waterparks and other major attractions are nice, but the Chippewa Valley is drawing visitors with a more diverse game plan that grows with each sculpture tour and other new, fresh ideas.