



# AAPA Lighthouse Award Project Highlight

## Cruise the Great Lakes: Elevating a Region through Strategic Cruise Public Relations



Detroit/Wayne County Port Authority & Cruise the Great Lakes  
Detroit, Michigan

### Project Overview

*Cruise the Great Lakes: Elevating a Region through Strategic Cruise Public Relations*

Award Category: Excellence in Cruise Practices

Completion Date: 9/12/2025

Description: In FY24, Cruise the Great Lakes launched a focused public relations campaign to position the region as a world-class small-ship cruise destination. Coordinated by the Conference of Great Lakes St. Lawrence Governors & Premiers and supported by the Detroit/Wayne County Port Authority, the effort replaced traditional advertising with earned media—hosting press events, pitching stories, and aligning messaging across 31 members and partners. The result: 157 earned media stories, \$19.3 million in media value, and 54.5 million people reached, all on a \$185,000 budget. The campaign supported a record-breaking 2025 cruise season and set a new standard for regional coordination and high-impact communications.

### Inspiration

CTGL was inspired by a shared recognition that the Great Lakes region—despite its rich cruise offerings and global appeal—lacked a unified brand presence in the cruise market. Stakeholders saw an opportunity to change that through collaboration, cost-sharing, and a smart, strategic PR campaign. The idea was simple: if we tell our story together, we can compete with the biggest cruise destinations in the world.

### Challenges

The program faced several key challenges:

- **Low baseline awareness** of Great Lakes cruising, even within the region.
- **Fragmented messaging** across jurisdictions, ports, and tourism boards.
- **Post-pandemic uncertainty** around cruise safety, demand, and investment.

CTGL overcame these by adopting a public relations-first approach: developing shared storylines, creating coordinated messaging, and engaging national and international travel media. The initiative replaced traditional ad spending with high-impact earned media, enabling each member to achieve results far beyond what any one port could do alone.

## Lessons Learned

**PR is a powerful equalizer.** A lean, coordinated media strategy can compete with large-scale advertising budgets when built on strong relationships and smart storytelling.

**Collaboration multiplies value.** Regional coordination reduces redundancy, maximizes efficiency, and strengthens overall messaging.

**Consistency is key.** Regular partner updates, shared performance data, and structured messaging keep the campaign aligned, even across borders and time zones.

## Value

This project makes the Detroit/Wayne County Port Authority—and all CTGL members—proud because it represents what’s possible when ports work together. It has repositioned the region on the global cruise map, helped generate record-breaking economic returns, and established a new model for regional collaboration. CTGL doesn’t just promote cruising—it promotes unity, innovation, and pride in the Great Lakes.

## Quotes

“The *Cruise the Great Lakes Campaign*, guided by the Conference of Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Governors and Premiers, has masterfully boosted the good fortunes of all Great Lakes port cities and supported Detroit’s emergence as a travel destination, showcasing world class museums, rich musical tradition, and spirit of innovation. We look forward to continued collaboration with CTGL to deliver a diversity of great experiences on the Great Lakes to travelers from all over the world.” - Jonathan C. Kinloch, Board Chairman of the Detroit Wayne County Port Authority and Wayne County Commissioner.

## Additional Information

CTGL continues to evolve with new media strategies, member-driven messaging, and expanded outreach. In FY25–26, the program will host new press events, publish final 2025 economic data, and launch a bilingual Speaker’s Bureau to help partners tell the region’s story. CTGL has also launched a Sustainability Pledge to highlight the environmental advantages of small-ship cruising on the Great Lakes, ensuring the region’s growth is both responsible and future-focused.

## Contact

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## Resources

Add any Links to videos or additional resources