



## **Minnesota Mississippi River Parkway Commission 2021-22 Annual Report (July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022)**

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### **Mission**

- The mission of the Minnesota Mississippi River Parkway Commission (MN-MRPC) is to preserve, promote and enhance the resources of the Mississippi River Valley and to develop the highways and amenities of the Great River Road (GRR). The Commission is organized and guided by Minnesota Statute 161.1419 and is a member of the ten state Mississippi River Parkway Commission.
- The Minnesota Great River Road is designated and managed by the Minnesota Department of Transportation under Minnesota Statute 161.142.
- The Minnesota Great River Road spans 565 miles, 43 communities, 20 counties, three tribes and six unique destination areas.

### **Commission Meetings**

- The MN-MRPC held regular quarterly meetings on August 19, 2021; November 18, 2021; February 23, 2022; and June 2, 2022. All meetings were held virtually via Zoom.
- The Executive Committee met virtually on January 12, 2022.
- A special meeting was held on April 8, 2022, to consider letter of support requests.
- Meeting materials, recordings and commission information are available at <https://www.commissions.leg.state.mn.us/mrpc/mrpc.html>.
- The Commission continues to focus on implementation of the MN Great River Road Corridor Management Plan (CMP) and the ten state MRPC Corridor Management Plan.

### **Projects & Activities**

#### **All-American Road Designation**

- Continued efforts to build awareness of the All-American Road designation and its importance.
- Completed information and celebration campaign that began in 2021, including a four-article series, digital ads, and podcast with River Travel Magazine. Final campaign data – 474,529 total impressions including digital ads, article page views, e-newsletter impressions, and Facebook impressions.
- Launched new “All-American Favorites” webpage to allow members, partners, and the public to share their personal tips. <https://www.mnmississippiriver.com/the-minnesota-great-river-road-is-an-all-american-road/all-american-favorites/>

#### **Plan Your Trip Interactive Mapping**

- Plan Your Trip online resource mapping, managed by MnDOT, continues to be available to the public via [www.mnmississippiriver.com](http://www.mnmississippiriver.com).
- MnDOT maintained, updated, and improved the traveler resource data within the mapping including removal of unnecessary data, checking contact information and links, adding the newly designated Interpretive Center, and adding cultural sites. Minnesota Grown sites were also updated to reflect current data.
- Initial planning was completed for a future system to allow for self-updating of listings by contacts at the 700+ resources.

- A series of “how-to” videos, developed by MnDOT, were launched in fall of 2021 to assist the public in accessing the many features of the mapping and resource listings.
- MnDOT’s Great River Road Program Manager drove the full route, checked wayfinding, and confirmed the turn-by-turn driving directions posted at [www.mnmississippiriver.com](http://www.mnmississippiriver.com).

### **Great River Road Ambassador Program**

- Goals of the Ambassador Program are to 1) develop and strengthen MN Mississippi River Parkway Commission (MN-MRPC) partnerships with byway attractions to leverage improved value from cooperative Minnesota and ten-state efforts; 2) provide Ambassadors with resources, materials, and training to maximize their time and talent; 3) confirm and update Minnesota Great River Road attraction information included in [Plan Your Trip](#) and other marketing; and 4) encourage Mississippi River exploration and stewardship.
- An Ambassador Orientation presentation was prepared, focused on Interpretive Centers as the first target audience. National MRPC Interpretive Center checklists were included in the content. MN-MRPC staff and MnDOT Great River Road program managers served as presenters, with MN-MRPC regional and agency members joining for some sessions.
- Winona County History Center participated in a test session and provided feedback.
- Virtual Ambassador Orientation sessions were held with the Charles Lindbergh House & Museum; Itasca State Park; Forest History Center; Itasca County Historical Society; Historic Fort Snelling; Oliver Kelley Farm; Minnesota History Center; and Mill City Museum.
- Great River Road Ambassador kits were sent as follow up to the sessions, including bandanas, reflective stickers and post-it notes for use at events and with visitors. Maps were also provided as needed.
- Fact sheets on the following topics were developed and posted online – MN Mississippi River Parkway Commission and MN Great River Road One-Pager; National Mississippi River Parkway Commission; Minnesota Mississippi River Parkway Commission; All-American Road/National Scenic Byways; Corridor Management Plan. The fact sheets are intended to serve as resources that Ambassadors can access as needed, supplementing the information in the Ambassador Orientation.
- The Interpretive Center Ambassador Orientation presentation was posted online in a general form, for Ambassadors to share with others after participating in the session with MN-MRPC staff and members. <https://www.mnmississippiriver.com/minnesota-great-river-road-ambassadors/>
- Ambassador sessions will be offered in the future to other partners including community tourism offices, Parkway Commissioners and Minnesota Grown members.

### **Roadside Storybook**

- The Executive Committee recommended seeking funding for completion of the Roadside Storybook project as a next step in implementation of the MN Great River Road Corridor Management Plan. First steps in the process were MnDOT completion of a condition review of existing panels and convening a project team to develop a project scope and estimate.
- The team has been reviewing information on the history of the project, existing panels, and storybook (interpretive panel) content for 21 counties developed 20+ years ago.
- MnDOT organized all materials and content and made it available electronically. The Legislative Coordinating Commission is looking at options to develop a longer-term secure web page to store the materials.
- The team recommended that all content be reviewed and updated and will be doing a review of two examples to develop a project scope for review of all content. Completion of the Roadside Storybook would potentially take place in two phases (if funding is secured) – content updating followed by panel fabrication and installation. Options to post content online will also be considered.
- A lead agency/organization and project manager will need to be identified prior to seeking funding.
- The project team will continue working on the project scope and cost estimate.

### **Drive the Great River Road Month**

- The 2021 theme was “The Minnesota Great River Road: An All-American Adventure. The campaign included a news release, social media posts and partner outreach.
- News coverage included the Brainerd Dispatch, West Central Tribune, Mill City Times, and Minneapolis RiverCurrent. A fall online article ran in River Travel Magazine as part of the All-American Road series.
- Launched All-American Favorites web page.
- Planning for Drive the Great River Road Month 2022 began in early 2022. The theme will be “Fall Harvest along the Minnesota Great River Road,” sponsored by Minnesota Grown/Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

## **Great River Road Network of Interpretive Centers**

- The Itasca County Historical Society held the grand opening of its new “River Room.”
- Historic Fort Snelling re-opened to the public and held a grand opening of the new visitor center.
- The National Eagle Center re-opened to the public and held a grand opening of its updated facility.
- Sites reported changes in programming and approaches after Covid-19 closures and considerations.
- Interpretive Centers provided updated profile information to the National MRPC Office for use on new maps and for general promotion.

## **Regional Meetings & Elections**

- Three virtual regional meetings and elections were held per MN Statute 161.1419.
- The Crossings Region (Grand Rapids to Brainerd) Meeting was held on November 30; the Scenic Region (Brainerd to Elk River) Meeting was held on December 2; and the Headwaters-Northwoods (Lake Itasca to Grand Rapids) Meeting was held on December 7. Agendas included state and national Great River Road updates, gathering of feedback from regions and elections. Megan Christianson, Karl Samp, and Sally Fineday were elected to two-year terms.
- A proposed amendment to the MN-MRPC statute to change regional commissioner terms from two-year to four-year staggered terms was included in an omnibus bill that did not pass during the legislative session.

## **MN Great River Road Website & Social Media**

- Launched new All-American Favorites page and added a resources section to Ambassador Program page.
- Site data from July 1, 2021, to June 30, 2022, included 13,121 sessions and 20,089 page views during the year with highest levels related to Drive the Great River Road Month and features such as an interview on KSTP TV’s Minnesota Live.
- Maintained MN Great River Road Facebook page with posts on events, activities, and attractions along the river. Total organic reach was 1,857 with top posts as follows – Grand Rapids sunset photo (fall); Winona County History Center cruises (spring); and September is Drive the Great River Road Month (fall).

## **MN Great River Road Print Map**

- Maps remaining in stock from a multi-year supply printed in spring of 2020 were distributed based on response to outreach or individual requests. Needs and capacities of partners continue to vary.
- 16,550 maps were shipped to 24 distribution partner locations in May 2022. Additional quantities were also fulfilled as requested during the year.
- The map was accepted for participation in Explore Minnesota’s MSP Airport Program providing the opportunity to reach new audiences.
- Maps were mailed out individually as ordered from the website. Responses were provided to email and phone travel information requests.

## **Access & Welcoming Environment Work Group**

- Examples of activities and initiatives were requested from member agencies, additional examples were gathered, and a summary document was compiled including short-term suggestions for MN-MRPC actions. The work group will review and determine next steps.

## **Media/Information Responses**

- MN-MRPC staff and members responded to requests for information and photographs including KSTP television “Minnesota Live,” Brainerd Dispatch, West Central Tribune, and National Scenic Byways Program.

## **National MRPC**

- MN-MRPC members serve in leadership roles for the National Mississippi River Parkway Commission. Anne Lewis currently serves as Pilot of the National MRPC. Minnesota is represented on Technical Committees by Tim Wilcox (Transportation); Megan Christianson (Marketing); Marni Karnowski (Environment, Recreation & Agriculture); and John Anfinson (Culture & Heritage Co-Chair).
- MN-MRPC members participated in the virtual Annual Meeting of the MRPC.
- The MRPC Stakeholder Report was presented to the MN-MRPC in November 2021, sent to partners as requested by regional commissioners, and provided to members of the Legislative Coordinating Commission along with a thank you for their support of the MN-MRPC as one of their joint commissions.

## **Funding/Great River Road Investments and Support**

- **State Operating Budget:** The MN-MRPC operated with state funding at levels allowing the Commission to continue its basic work and implement Corridor Management Plan priorities. The base operating budget for FY '22 was \$78,000.
- **MnDOT:** MnDOT provided special project staffing in the form of a SEEDS student worker for improvements to and maintenance of the Plan Your Trip and Plan Your Project Interactive Mapping Tools, and story maps.
- **Minnesota Transportation Alternatives Program:** Local Great River Road communities sought funds for projects through the Minnesota Transportation Alternatives Program. MnDOT provided information on project intent, MN-MRPC conducted outreach to local applicants, reviewed project information, approved and provided letters for three project applications along the Great River Road. The requests, totaling approximately \$1.2 million, were for trail projects that would improve the byway experience for visitors and residents and help implement the MN Great River Road Corridor Management Plan.
- **National Scenic Byway Grants:** The MN-MRPC reached out to partners and stakeholders when the Notice of Funding Opportunity was released, participated in the FHWA webinar on the topic, and participated in meetings and calls with potential local project contacts. The MN-MRPC provided letters of support for four National Scenic Byway Grant applications for projects benefitting the Great River Road - Dakota County (Fischer Avenue Trailhead); Washington County (Point Douglas Trailhead); and Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe (Wild Parsnip Removal Project and Tourism/Interpretive Center). The requests totaled just over \$2.5 million. MN-MRPC provided a letter of support for the National MRPC's application to fund a new website and app; and requested and received a letter of support from Rep. Betty McCollum. The MN-MRPC also sent letters to Senators Klobuchar and Smith encouraging their support for National Scenic Byways Program funding.
- **EDA Travel, Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Grants:** MN-MRPC members and staff reviewed information and convened an ad hoc working group to review the opportunities.

## **Examples of Local, Regional and Partner Activities or Issues**

- **Three Rivers Park District:** MN-MRPC provided letters of support for two West Mississippi River Trail projects seeking federal transportation funds to provide an off-road option for those traveling by foot or bicycle. A presentation on the park district's plans, projects and programs along the Mississippi was provided to MN-MRPC.
- **Minneapolis West River Parkway:** Responded to contacts from the public regarding changes to the roadway in this area.
- **Brainerd Mississippi Landing Trailhead Park:** A groundbreaking event was held on June 6, 2022.
- **St. Anthony Falls Cutoff Wall:** Commission member John Anfinson researched, monitored developments, and provided information about issues related to the history, ownership, and responsibility for the wall under the Mississippi River.
- **Mississippi River Trail (MRT):** Presentation to the MN-MRPC in November 2021 about the process and timeline to update the MRT. Input from MN-MRPC members was invited and reports will be provided when available.
- **Mississippi Headwaters Board:** Presentation to the MN-MRPC highlighting information about the MHB's river signage project and events webpage. <https://www.mississippiheadwaters.org/> The MN-MRPC works with the Mississippi Headwaters Board to promote events and regularly share information on topics of mutual interest.
- **National Loon Center:** MN-MRPC provided letter of support as the center seeks federal funds for construction of a new facility.

## **Membership**

- The MN-MRPC is organized by state statute to include: (2) Members of the House of Representatives; (2) Members of the Senate; (5) Members of State Agencies - (1) appointed by each: DNR, MnDOT, Historical Society, Agriculture & Tourism; (5) Regional Members – (1) from each of the Great River Road regions established in statute; (1) Member-At-Large – appointed by the other 14.
- Welcome to new technical members Kelli Bruns representing the Department of Natural Resources and Tucker Blythe representing the National Park Service. Thank you to departing technical members Gina Bonsignore and Craig Hansen for their service to the Commission.

**This report is respectfully submitted on August 15, 2022.**  
**Sen. David Senjem, MN-MRPC Chair**

## Minnesota Great River Road Ambassador Kits





## Minnesota Great River Road Roadside Storybook Project Background - Nov. 18, 2021



The Federal Highway Administration's National Scenic Byways Program invites travelers to *Come Closer to America's heart and soul....*

FHWA's program codified how to manage a byway for travelers and residents who respond to their invitation by including byway interpretation as a primary responsibility, in addition to safeguarding intrinsic resources and the byway experience.



The **2000 Minnesota Great River Road Corridor Management Plan** implementation resulted in significant interpretation accomplishments:

- ✓ Developed 2001 Minnesota Great River Road Interpretive Plan, with **Roadside Storybook**
- ✓ Fabricated and installed **Roadside Storybook** in four+ counties
- ✓ Developed 2004 10-state Great River Road Interpretive Plan and Toolkit
- ✓ Designated 13 Minnesota Great River Road National Interpretive Centers



The **Roadside Storybook** describes the river's stories, with a chapter in each of the 21 counties along the river in Minnesota. The design carries forward frames and panel layouts MnDOT used at Rest Areas and overlooks previously. Each county chapter included six panels which provided:

- ✓ 10-state and statewide overview, and county map of intrinsic resources (one panel)
- ✓ Hydrology and geology (one panel)
- ✓ Flora and fauna (one panel)
- ✓ River-related human and natural history and sometimes its present or future story (three panels)



The current [Minnesota Great River Road Corridor Management Plan](#) includes specific **Roadside Storybook** strategies that respond to public and partner engagement that told the Parkway Commission to focus on

- ✓ Add more interpretation along the byway,
- ✓ develop White Earth, Leech Lake and Prairie Island community content,
- ✓ apply technology (QR codes, website, interactive map/YouTube, digital travel guides), and
- ✓ maintain existing roadside interpretation.

The CMP field survey revealed visitors desire more interpretation on the Great River Road itself so they can understand what they are seeing and experiencing. Example responses stated: "Need more signage and interpretive areas," "Would like to see more information on the Ojibwe tribe," and "Need more signs to talk about history and area. Did not know it was a scenic byway until the survey people told us." This sentiment was repeated at open houses and local meetings.

CMP "An interpretive sign turns facts into an experience that captures visitors' interests, provokes their curiosity, and makes them emotionally and actively involved so they feel a part of the story and understand the significance of a site. While existing interpretive panels, Interpretive Centers, visitor centers, local museums, and Minnesota Historical Society sites, our visitors, MN-MRPC, PAT and public outreach tell us more interpretation directed specifically to Great River Road travelers is needed." Using MnGRR Plan Your Trip map information can also encourage revisitation with so much left to see, and cross promotion to other destination areas, or even ten states.



Currently there are 63 interpretive panels, in 32 frames, on 22 sites along the river from the headwaters to the Iowa boarder. MnDOT field analysis of existing Great River Road interpretive panels indicates approximately

- ✓ 31 are in good condition, but need cleaning;
- ✓ 30 need repair
- ✓ 18 need replacement

In addition, a complete **Roadside Storybook** develops 16 more counties and three Tribal communities (6 panels ea.)

(Hubbard, Beltrami, Itasca, Aitkin, Cass, Morrison, Stearns, Benton, Wright, Anoka, Hennepin, Ramsey, Washington, Goodhue, Wabasha, Winona)



### **2021 Theme**

- The Minnesota Great River Road: An All-American Adventure

### **Goals**

- Raise awareness about and celebrate the MN Great River Road's new All-American Road status
- Encourage travel to MN Great River Road scenic reaches, historic features, communities, and attractions
- Build All-American Favorites content for website
- Announce new Plan Your Trip instructional videos
- Promote the ten state GRR and sweepstakes

### **News Release**

- Release was sent to media list, distribution partners (CVBs/Chambers, State Parks, Interpretive Centers, Welcome Centers, etc.) and MN-MRPC members.
- Articles/Blogs – Brainerd Dispatch, West Central Tribune, Mill City Times, Minneapolis River Current
- Social media posts by members including Minnesota DNR, Rep. Kristin Robbins

### **Digital Partnership**

- River Travel Media general MN GRR ads and fall article (part of a series of four seasonal articles). Analytics attached for first half of campaign.

### **Governor's Proclamation**

- Proclamation received calling out September as Drive the Great River Road Month in Minnesota.

### **MN Great River Road Website**

- 1,542 unique sessions in September (compared to 1,212 in August).

### **Facebook**

- 10 posts on Great River Road MN page. Total reach of posts – approx. 1,049 (253 in August). Reach in Sept. 2020 was over 60,000 with most coming from paid advertising which was not done in 2021.

### **Print Maps**

- 1,550 MN GRR maps provided to partner distribution sites