

WISCONSIN GREAT RIVER ROAD CORRIDOR MANAGEMENT

Introduction

The planning and development of the Wisconsin Great River Road has been underway since the 1930s, by numerous governmental agencies at federal, state, regional levels as well as public/private sectors. In recent history (June 1999) the entire length of the Great River Road was declared as Wisconsin's first State Scenic Byway.

The Mississippi River Parkway Commission has been the main coordinating agency in cooperation with state, regional, local agency associates. The management initiatives that have evolved over this extended history are revealed in many documents and actions - not conveniently confined to a single summation. The desertion that follows provides background and a summary itemization of ongoing and new key management elements as relates to intrinsic qualities german to the advancement of the Wisconsin Great River Road as an All American Highway. The All American Highway designation will bestow deserving recognition on the Wisconsin Great River Road as a truly unique feature in mid America.

The plan carries with it no new regulations or infringement on private property. Nor does it require adoption of any new local ordinances; prohibit new construction or development; or require participation in corridor programs. On the otherhand the designation will instill new tourism opportunities and at the same time begs increased corresponding responsibilities and partnerships of all entities in the corridor.

Location and Description of the Wisconsin Great River Road

The Wisconsin Great River Corridor boundaries, location and description of its many intrinsic qualities and land uses are illustrated on maps contained in Attachment 1 - "Historical and Archeological Interpretation Report - Seeing History on the Wisconsin Great River Road (section 3)", in Attachment 2 - "Planning Framework for Visitor Facilities Along the Wisconsin Great River Road", and in Attachment 3 - "Wisconsin's Great River Road (map)". The corridor boundaries are generally defined as the viewshed from the roadway.

The Wisconsin Mississippi River Parkway Commission as lead byway agency.

The many facets of corridor management are a cooperative effort between the **Wisconsin Mississippi River Parkway Commission (WI MRPC)** state and regional agencies, local governments and public/private interests.

The Wisconsin Mississippi River Parkway Commission is established by Wisconsin State Statute 14.85 (refer to page 5 of the WI MRPC Annual Report, Attachment 5). Subsection 5 of the Statutes states:

(5) the commission shall:

- a) Assist in coordinating the development and preservation of the great river road in Wisconsin and its embellishments, such as scenic easements, roadside parks, and scenic outlooks.
- b) Assist other state agencies in all efforts to create a unified development of the great river road in Wisconsin and any of its collateral features.
- c) Cooperate with similar committees or commissions in other states and Canadian provinces in the furtherance of the ultimate development of the Great River Road from Canada to the gulf of Mexico.
- d) Consult with appropriate Regional Planning Commissions regarding the Mississippi river parkway.
- e) Assist in promoting as an attractive travel destination the great river road in Wisconsin and the unique historical, cultural, aesthetic and recreational features along the route of the great river road, such as local communities, off-road parks and forests, and water related facilities.

Furthermore the statutes establishes that the Commission shall consist of 1 representative from each of the 8 river counties plus two members each from the State Senate and House respectively. In accordance with the statute ex official **members include the Secretaries of Transportation, Natural Resources, Tourism, Commerce, and the State Historical Society.** There is established a Technical Advisory Committee made up of representatives from the aforementioned state agencies plus the two **Regional Planning Commissioners** whose jurisdiction includes the 8 river counties. The listing of the commission and their technical committee responsibilities and a review of past years accomplishments; future year goals and objectives are outlined in the WI MRPC Annual Report (Attachment 5). The Commission and TAC meet a minimum of quarterly one of which is in the Capital City with state agency administrators represented to enhance program coordination and input. In addition Wisconsin Mississippi River Parkway Commission members participate in the **National Organization of the 10-State Mississippi River Parkway Commission** which meets semi annually (Attachment 6).

Recognizing the need for comprehensive and coordinated planning.

It was the consensus of the Wisconsin Mississippi River Parkway Commission and its state and regional associates that there was a need for a **coordinated strategy** for enhancing existing, developing new, and preserving the many intrinsic qualities of the Wisconsin Great River Road corridor. Specialized consultant services were obtained to develop three comprehensive reports:

- Attachment 1) "Historical and Archeological Interpretation Report - Seeing History on the Wisconsin Great River Road."
- Attachment 2) "Planning Framework for Visitor Facilities Along the Wisconsin Great River Road."
- Attachment 7) "Great River Road Design Guide."

The planning and implementation framework and processes presented in these reports provides guidance for the **assessment of and recommendations for preservation, interpretation and enhancement of the wealth of the intrinsic qualities** in this magnificent corridor - and furthermore to inspire federal, state, county, river town governments and private sector to work in partnership toward coordinated advancement. The ultimate goal is to provide the Wisconsin Great River Road visitor a meaningful experience of the history, recreation, natural beauty, and river town charm along the corridor of one of the world's truly great rivers.

General strategies for preserving, interpreting, and enhancing the intrinsic qualities and the commitments/participation of agencies and local governments: (key elements highlighted)

SCENIC - Approximately 165 miles of the Wisconsin Great River Road (except within City/Village limits) are flanked by **scenic easements** generally extending 350 feet from the roadway center line. These scenic easements (administered by WI DOT) address building type and spacing, deforestation, excavations, signage, junkyards, etc. (sample easement document, Attachment 8). Furthermore, **regulation of outdoor advertising** along the entire length of Wisconsin's GRR is governed by Wisconsin State Statute 84.30(1) - for which legislative findings states: "To promote the safety, convenience and enjoyment of public travel, to preserve the natural beauty of Wisconsin, to aid in the free flow of interstate commerce, to protect the public investment in highways, and to conform to the expressed intent of congress to control the erection and maintenance of outdoor advertising signs, displays and devices adjacent to the national system of interstate and defense highways, it is hereby declared to be necessary in the public interest to control the erection and maintenance of billboards and other outdoor advertising devices adjacent to said system of interstate and federal-aid primary highways and the Great River Road".

The narrow confines of the corridor with the steep bluffs on one side and a railroad and Mississippi River on the other in itself precludes development in many of the scenic areas. The narrow corridor width has necessitated the Wisconsin Department of Transportation to employ **special design considerations** to blend the roadway and its appertenses, including bike accommodations, into the landscape as well as special streetscapes as the GRR passes through urban areas. The special design techniques and visual evaluations as presented in the Design Guide (Attachment 7) are also consciously employed. Attachment 9 entitled Reopening the Great River Road illustrates design and construction techniques employed on a Great River Road improvement project in Wisconsin.

ARCHEOLOGICAL - **Archeological surveys** have been completed for large segments of the Mississippi River Corridor. These surveys have been completed as part of planning studies for the development of highway projects and also as part of research undertaken by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, UW LaCrosse and other work funded and **sponsored by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin**. As a result, many significant sites have been discovered and **33 archeological sites** along the Mississippi River are currently listed in the national Register of Historic Places.

As a result of planning efforts by the Mississippi River Parkway Commission the State Historical Society of Wisconsin has just initiated a two-year ISTE A Enhancement grant funded project to identify **prehistoric Native American Burial Mound sites** along the Mississippi River that are amenable for public interpretation; to identify and protect other burial mound sites located along the river; and to develop materials that will enhance the scenic and heritage tourism values of this corridor.

Attachment 1 - section 2 suggests **other archeological sites** that are worthy of identification and interpretation. Continuing enhancement of selected sites are under the guidance of the State Historical Society.

CULTURAL - The residents of the corridor are proud to **display their heritage** thru local museums, by returning the early architecture of homes and storefronts, many festivals, brochures (Attachment 10), and by individual and the Wisconsin Great River Road web pages (<http://mississippi-river.com/mrpc>).

The pride of their culture and for the Great River Road has lead communities to undertake formal planning studies to incorporate **aesthetic designs** in the renovation of their downtowns such as the Rivertown theme in Prescott.

RECREATIONAL - A comprehensive **Bikeway Plan** for the entire length of the Wisconsin Great River Road was recently completed by the State Bike/Pedestrian Coordinator staff in cooperation with the WI MRPC. (Attachment 11). The report concluded that 215 miles of the Great River Road provide adequate accommodation

for bikers and makes recommendations for the remaining miles. The report also suggests a strong partnership with the rivertowns, in terms of hosting, providing services, and advertising.

The Department of Natural Resources (**DNR**) is **committed** to participation on the Wisconsin Mississippi River Parkway Commission and to managing a large number and wide variety of amenities that contribute to the Great River Road Experience (see inventory map contained in Attachment 2).

Amenities include the Lower St. Croix National Scenic Riverway, six Wildlife or Natural Areas, and seven State Parks/Trails/Historic Sites.

Access to the Mississippi River, provided by public and private sites, is very good. The DNR maintains several sites and coordinates feasibility, design, and funding for new sites.

DNR management has a strong presence on the Mississippi in the areas of resource monitoring, regulatory protection, and cooperative planning and funding of many large habitat improvement projects. High quality natural resource and habitat improvement projects provide the foundation for fish and wildlife which in turn support a billion dollar recreation industry annually.

The **Regional Planning Commissions (RPCs)** prepares/updates, on a cyclical basis, **Outdoor Recreation Facility Plans** for counties, townships, cities and villages along the Great River Road. These plans establish eligibility for State Stewardship Grants and Federal LAWCON funds as administered by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. As well as encouragement to local governments to apply for TEA 21 Enhancement Grants. The RPCs have provide a listing of potential amenities improvements for the Great River Road Corridor.

Four Wisconsin Great River Road Communities, namely, Trempealeau, Onalaska, Lacrosse, and Potosi are included in the **Upper Mississippi American Rivers Initiative program**.

Attachment 2 provides an **updated inventory and automated database** for the many and varied recreational facilities along the entire length of the corridor. Planning guidelines are provided for the GRR Bikeway. Also, included is an analysis and guidance relative to **visitor facilities** placement and improvements. As well as a visual analysis of the corridor.

HISTORICAL - Literally thousands of buildings and structures possessing some historical or architectural interest have been identified by the Historic Preservation Division of the State Historical Society in its ongoing survey and evaluation efforts. 97 of these properties have been evaluated and formally listed in the **National Register of Historic Places**. This number is somewhat misleading as it includes many historic districts which may contain dozens of individual buildings. In addition,

many counties and local units of government have established their own preservation programs through the enactment of local historic preservation ordinances and the establishment of landmarks commissions. The report entitled "Seeing History on Wisconsin Great River Road" (Attachment 1) verbalizes (by Historian) **interpretation of the historical sites and the river towns** along the Wisconsin Great River Road. The Historian's research dossiers that are on file provide detailed information on counties, communities, and themes. The **prototype travel guide** (section 3 of Attachment 1 presents interpretation in context of five themes: Landscape, People, Transportation, Occupations, and Architecture. The format enhances readability and creates links between individual properties while organizing them in a manageable manner to promote clear, comprehensible interpretation. It is proposed that **kiosks** be erected at appropriate sites in each community relating its history as presented in the prototype travel guide. Also, this information is (can be) utilized in the WI MRPC, as well as in individual community **web sites, and in promotion and marking brochures**, etc. Text and graphics for **Gateway Kiosks** proposed to be located at each end (or beginning) of the Wisconsin Great River Road and recommendations for modifications to some existing and identification of additional **State Historical Markers** are presented in Attachment 1. The grant applications submitted to FHWA for implementation for both Gateway Kiosk and the Historical Marker update have been approved. These projects are generally described as follows:

1. Gateway markers at each end of the Wisconsin Great River Road are envisioned to be side by side markers - one presenting the viewer geographic information superimposed on a relief background. The other side to present text summaries of the 5 historical themes re Environmental, Transportation, People, Occupations, and Architecture. Furthermore, the City of Prescott has recently expressed interest in expanding this concept to include perhaps a "learning center" on the bluff top in Freedom Park in a setting that provides a panoramic view of the Mississippi and St. Croix River confluence.
2. Upgrading of the existing 33 Historical Markers in text and form - along with adding additional markers.

Public Involvement is continuous - While each meeting of the Mississippi River Parkway Commission and their TAC meetings are publicly announced - it is the resolve of the MRPC to undertake a series of up to 5 local meetings along the length of the Great River Road to inform and solicit input concerning the implementation recommendations set forth in Attachments 1, 2, and 11, and the virtues and responsibilities of being designated an All American Highway.

230 of the 250 mile Wisconsin Great River Road is State Trunk Highway 35 - the remaining 20 miles is routed over Grant County highways. The GRR distinctive green and white **Helmsman Wheel route marker** is employed along the entire route. There are **no obvious, unusual safety problems** or difficulties of