



**Minnesota Mississippi River Parkway Commission
1st Quarter Meeting – February 9, 2024
Centennial Building Room 101/Zoom Hybrid
MINUTES – Draft**

Commissioners Present

Sally Fineday – Lake Itasca to Grand Rapids
Megan Christianson – Grand Rapids to Brainerd
Karl Samp – Brainerd to Elk River
John Anfinson – Elk River to Hastings
Sen. Karin Housley
Paul Hugunin – Agriculture Appointee
David Kelliher – Historical Society Appointee
Grant Wilson – Natural Resources Appointee
Anne Lewis – At-Large Member

Technical Advisors/Staff Present

Kelli Bruns – Natural Resources
Carol Zoff – Transportation
Peter MacDonagh - Transportation

Megan Voelke - LCC
Chris Miller – MN-MRPC Staff

Members Absent

Sen. John Hoffman
Rep. Sydney Jordan
Rep. Leigh Fike
Lisa Havelka – Tourism Appointee
Marni Karnowski – Transportation Appointee
Kate Carlson – Hastings to Iowa Border
Tucker Blythe – National Park Service

Guest Present

Kathleen Ryan - Aitkin County
Lauren Peck – Natural Resources

The meeting was called to order at 2:05 p.m. by Senator Housley, Chair. A quorum was present after the informational presentation.

Informational Presentation - Aitkin River Trails Committee: Kathleen Ryan of Aitkin County was welcomed to the meeting and shared information about the Aitkin River Trails Committee, their events and plans for the future. The committee aims to promote Aitkin County as a destination for outdoor recreation and natural wonder; and includes the Aitkin County Chamber, Aitkin County Economic Development, Mississippi Headwaters Board, key community members, and a representative of the MN-MRPC. Regional Commissioner Megan Christianson has attended the committee's meetings and spoke highly of the group and its results. Commission members followed up with questions and discussion, and requested details on upcoming 2024 events when available.

Approve Agenda and Minutes from 11/16/23 Meeting: Motion by John Anfinson and seconded by Karl Samp to approve the draft agenda and meeting minutes as presented. Motion carried.

Budget Report: The year-to-date budget report in the meeting packet was reviewed and discussed. Motion by Anne Lewis and seconded by Sally Fineday to accept the report as presented. Motion carried.

Executive Committee Support Letter Authority: On January 23, the Executive Committee approved letters of support for the City of Sauk Rapids for two projects previously approved for Transportation Alternatives program letters. The new letters were for the same projects, but two different funding sources. The Executive Committee requested that the full Commission consider formalizing this authority for the Executive Committee between regular quarterly meetings. Motion by Grant Wilson and seconded by Anne Lewis to give Chair and Vice Chair authority to provide updated letters of support for projects previously reviewed and approved by the MN-MRPC. Motion carried.

MN-MRPC Priorities: The Executive Committee reviewed the listing of current and on-hold MN-MRPC priorities and past feedback provided by the full MN-MRPC. If the MN-MRPC decides to move forward and host a National MRPC Annual Meeting, that will move to the top of the priority list and timelines for other projects could change. The priorities list will be reviewed again in the future. Members were asked for comments or information on new topics that have come up recently. Carol Zoff requested volunteers to assist in reviewing material and developing a process for retention of Great River Road and MN-MRPC historical records, and its addition to the current priorities list. David Kelliher noted that MN Historical Society archivists stand ready to help. Carol Zoff, John Anfinson, David Kelliher and Chris Miller volunteered to work on a plan.

National MRPC 2024 Annual Meeting: John Anfinson provided background on status of the 2024 Annual Meeting. The MN-MRPC Executive Committee discussed hosting an Annual Meeting in Minnesota in 2024 or 2025, with the

preference being 2025. They asked that the National Office check with other states for 2024. After doing so, the National MRPC remains in need of a host state and location for the 2024 meeting. Discussion included the organizational importance of having a site for the 2024 Annual Meeting; impacts of the short planning timeline on MN-MRPC's capacity; and the need to be realistic about this timeline in terms of what can be provided. A suggestion was made to say yes to 2024 with the understanding that Minnesota would then be able to host again in a year of our choosing, with longer timelines to plan and promote.

Motion by John Anfinson and seconded by David Kelliher to move forward with plans to host the 2024 MRPC Annual Meeting in Minnesota. Motion carried. There was discussion on the process to choose the meeting location. Motion by John Anfinson and seconded by Sen. Housley to authorize the MN-MRPC Executive Committee to select a meeting host site for recommendation to the National MRPC. Motion carried.

Bemidji and Winona were mentioned as possible locations. Information on venues and availability will be requested from both communities. The Twin Cities was noted as another option if needed. The National MRPC Office will contract with facilities, handle overall meeting planning and registration. A planning team from the MN-MRPC will be needed to work on agenda topics and host state responsibilities. Assistance and participation from all MN-MRPC members will be requested as the plans come together. John Anfinson, Anne Lewis, and David Kelliher volunteered to serve on the planning team. Sally Fineday and Karl Samp offered to assist if the meeting location is in northern Minnesota.

MRPC Communications and Marketing Committee: Chris Miller reported on the most recent meeting. The 4th quarter 2023 marketing report was shared and will be available soon on the MRPC members website. Newsletter and social media content ideas for 2024 were discussed, and states will be asked to submit information and photos under several topics for use throughout the year. Details will be sent out to MN-MRPC members when available.

MRPC Culture and Heritage Committee: John Anfinson reported on activities of the committee including their work to facilitate model Interpretive Center nominations that can be reviewed and utilized by sites interested in starting the process. There are now two model nominations in place, one of which is the newest GRR Interpretive Center - Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge Visitor Center in Wisconsin.

MRPC Environment, Recreation and Agriculture Committee: Roz Schnick of the Wisconsin MRPC will speak at the May 30 MN-MRPC meeting. Chris will send out links to a couple of upcoming webinars recommended by Roz.

MRPC Transportation Committee: Peter MacDonagh reported that the committee continues to work on trademark clarifications or permissions needed to sign the Mississippi River Trail (MRT). The committee is also documenting signage and directions to Great River Road Interpretive Centers. Minnesota has provided the requested information.

Drive the Great River Road Month 2024: A team meeting was held in late January to start planning for the September 2024 promotion. Grant Wilson introduced Lauren Peck, from the DNR Central Region Communications Office, who will be partnering on the promotion this year, provided an overview of discussions to date and requested feedback from members. The team wants to capture input from MN-MRPC members and then get back together to continue planning. The overall theme centers on connecting people to outdoor recreation, special outdoor places, and highlighting the 100th anniversary of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge.

Commission Discussion

- Build on things already happening and take advantage of what is available. Focusing could be the challenge.
- Partnering with agencies is great. Historic sites might be a theme for a future year and could include partnering with tribal nations.
- There are outdoor opportunities at MN Historical Society sites that could be included in this year's theme.
- The structure of the promotion is needed first followed by outreach to fill in the content specifics.
- A kick-off event has already been discussed, possibly something at the State Fair based on the Minnesota Grown example. Events like that are great ways to gather and connect patterns.
- Members were asked to send additional ideas to Grant, Kelli or Chris, and/or let them know if you would like to join the planning team.

MN Great River Road Print Maps: A limited supply of MN Great River Road maps remains on hand, which will not be enough to supply partner distribution sites for the summer season. The remaining maps can be used to fulfill individual requests from the website and provide small quantities for Commission members and partners. There was discussion by the Executive Committee on whether print maps should continue to be used for MN Great River Road promotion and

information. The committee recommended consideration by the full Commission. Does the Commission recommend printing an updated map if/when funds are available or a focus on electronic information only?

Commission Discussion

- Interpretive Centers are an important feature of the maps, and the maps are more than just driving directions – they provide exposure to what is available along the route.
- It will not be possible to fund maps now if the 2024 Annual Meeting is hosted in Minnesota. If not, consider printing maps.
- Cost varies depending on the size of the print run, shipping, and storage. Quotes could be obtained after checking quantities at partner distribution sites. Some sites use quite a few maps, others do not, depending on a lot of factors.
- Maps can be particularly important if areas of the route are missing any road signs or there are gaps in cell phone coverage.
- Maps are how people learn about the Great River Road.
- If a new quantity is printed, the Upper Mississippi National Wildlife and Fish Refuge should be visible and marked.
- Come back to this topic in the future, consensus was to continue with printed materials as funding allows.

Northland Reliability Project Update: The comment letter authorized by the MN-MRPC in November 2023 was submitted, and responses from Minnesota Power and Great River Energy included specific response to the MN-MRPC comments. Additional opportunities to review and comment on this project should be coming in the future. Information will be sent to members when available.

Dairyland Wabasha Relocation Project Update: MN-MRPC representatives that volunteered at the last meeting met with project contacts in December. Meeting notes were referenced in the meeting packet. Additional information will be shared with Commission members in the future as it is received.

Lotis Environmental Bowstring Project Update: Comments and requests were emailed as authorized at the November 2023 MN-MRPC meeting. A summary of communications on the project was referenced in the meeting packet. Sally Fineday described concerns related to projects that often take the least costly option on tribal lands, which was why she requested the documentation showing full review and approval by the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe. The documents were provided as requested and demonstrated the appropriate levels of review.

Overall Process for Comments on Public Utility Projects: Are there changes needed to the current process or other considerations to be included?

- MN-MRPC is not a regulatory body but should raise awareness of the value of National Scenic Byways/All-American Roads. Member agencies and their comments can help support this.
- Some states have scenic easements in place that help with definition and protection of certain areas. Is information available that would allow the Commission to include scenic easements and/or scenic areas in comment letters?
- There are likely to be more renewable energy projects coming and should the Commission prepare a response to be ready for such projects if they impact the Great River Road?
- An example was shared regarding regulations on signage/billboards along a byway – are there rules or regulations that would also apply to utility projects?

Scenic Easement Information/Mapping: Carol Zoff described scenic areas and scenic easements and how this information might be included in future MN-MRPC comments on proposed public utility projects along the Great River Road. Scenic areas and scenic easements have different definitions, and both exist in Minnesota. MnDOT is working to make mapping of scenic easements and scenic areas available to the public and will keep the MN-MRPC informed as the process continues. An update will be provided at a future meeting.

Letter of Support Request – Brainerd TH 210/Lum Park Bridge Project: The Commission approved a letter of support for this project in November 2023 as part of the Transportation Alternatives project listing. The City of Brainerd is now requesting a letter for a LCCMR application and/or a general letter of support for the project. They are also seeking bonding funds. Motion by Karl Samp and seconded by Senator Housley to approve the City of Brainerd TH 210/Lum Park Bridge Project letter as requested. Motion carried. Karl Samp requested a map of the project area for reference.

Next Meeting: May 30, 2024; 2:00 – 4:30 p.m.; Capitol Room 123 and Zoom

Adjournment: There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 4:25 p.m.