



## **Minnesota Mississippi River Parkway Commission 2023-24 Annual Report (July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024)**

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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; and is home to 13 National Great River Road Interpretive Centers.

### **Commission Meetings**

- The MN-MRPC held regular business meetings on August 17, 2023; November 16, 2023; February 9, 2024; and May 30, 2024. A special meeting was held on October 16, 2023. Executive Committee meetings were held on January 23 and February 21, 2024.
- 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.

### **Great River Road Projects & Activities**

#### **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.
- Two virtual Ambassador Orientation sessions were held for MN-MRPC members in July 2023.
- A virtual Drive the Great River Road Month launch meeting was held in August 2023, focused on Community Tourism Offices and Interpretive Centers and their roles as Great River Road Ambassadors.
- Great River Road Ambassador promotional item kits were sent as follow-up to the sessions. Maps were also provided as requested.
- Virtual Ambassador Orientations are available upon request for new MN-MRPC members, and new staff members at Great River Road Interpretive Centers and Community Tourism Offices.
- Ambassador information including fact sheets and presentations is available at <https://www.mnmississippiriver.com/minnesota-great-river-road-ambassadors/>.

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

- The MN-MRPC celebrates Drive the Great River Road Month annually in September, in conjunction with the ten-state Great River Road promotion.
- The 2023 Minnesota theme was "*Inspired: Amazing Art and Vibrant Vistas of the Great River Road*."
- Goals included encouraging travel to MN Great River Road communities in the fall shoulder season, raising awareness of art destinations along the full MN Great River Road, building relationships with MN Great River Road Ambassadors, and raising awareness about the Great River Road as part of National Drive the Great River Road Month.
- Highlights of the promotion included a kick-off event at the Minnesota Marine Art Museum, landing webpage showcasing communities - <https://www.mnmississippiriver.com/arts-attractions/>, and social media posts and promotion by MN-MRPC members and partners.
- Nine communities submitted attraction information and photos for the campaign.
- Four of the top six Facebook posts for the year were from the Drive the Great River Road Month campaign.

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

- MN-MRPC Vice Chair John Anfinson visited five Interpretive Centers in July 2023 – Oliver Kelley Farm, Charles A. Lindbergh House & Museum, Itasca County Historical Society, Forest History Center, and Itasca State Park – to provide Great River Road information, tour and view facilities and offerings, discuss partnership opportunities and gather information for National MRPC Interpretive Center checklists.

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

- Site data from July 1, 2023, to June 30, 2024, included 15,000 sessions (FY 23 -12,303 sessions) and 58,000 page views (FY 23 - 17,950 page views). Top pages visited – Home Page, About the Minnesota Great River Road, Order Maps and All-American Road.
- Maintained MN Great River Road Facebook page with posts on events, activities, and attractions along the river. Total organic (unpaid) reach was 26,859 (up from 6,243 in FY23) with top posts as follows – Smaczne Jablka Apple Fest (Drive GRR Month); Visit Little Falls Ciao Thyme Restaurant; Grumpy Old Men Festival, Wabasha; Lake City Arts (Drive GRR Month); September is Drive the Great River Road Month; Drive the Great River Road Month Governor's Proclamation.

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

- Minnesota Great River Road Plan Your Trip online resource mapping, hosted and managed by MnDOT, continues to be available to the public via [www.mnmississippiriver.com](http://www.mnmississippiriver.com).
- Traveler resource data was maintained and Plan Your Trip demonstrations were provided as part of Ambassador Orientation sessions.

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

- A contract for map storage and shipping closed out December 31, 2023. The remaining map quantity will be utilized for small shipments upon request, maintenance of office supply for requests from website form, and meetings and events.
- Maps were mailed out individually as ordered from the website. The map is also available in downloadable pdf form at <https://www.mnmississippiriver.com/order-maps/>
- A new print run is needed when funding allows, as requests for the maps continue to come in from distribution partners.

### **Great River Road Document Archiving Project**

- MN Department of Transportation, Minnesota Historical Society and MN-MRPC representatives developed a process for review and long-term archiving of and public access to Great River Road historical records that have been in storage at the MN Department of Transportation.
- MN Department of Transportation Great River Road Program Managers created inventory sheets for 24 boxes of program records for shipment to the Minnesota Historical Society. One box of documents will be digitized, containing foundational reports and the history of Great River Road development in Minnesota. The additional documents will be archived and accessible in hard copy, and provide a detailed record of principles, public engagement, planning, marketing, funding, and site development by all Great River Road partners.

### **MN-MRPC Classification in Transportation Statute**

- A team was convened to review statutes defining and mentioning both the MN-MRPC and Great River Road, and to consider development of recommendations for the next legislative session.

## **Operation Pollination**

- The National MRPC adopted the Operation Pollination Resolution at their 2023 Annual Meeting. It is a non-binding resolution supporting Rotary International's initiatives to protect pollinators along the Mississippi River corridor. The resolution was reviewed and endorsed by the MN-MRPC at their November 2023 meeting.
- A partnership signing event for Minnesota partners was held on April 19, 2024, at the Minneapolis Watershed Management Organization, hosted by the National Park Service. Vice Chair John Anfinson signed on behalf of the MN-MRPC, with MN-MRPC members and technical advisors Marni Karnowski, Peter MacDonagh and Tucker Blythe in attendance.

## **Public Utility Projects**

- The MN-MRPC was notified of three projects with potential impact to the Great River Road. The Commission considered and approved comments, reviewed past processes and comments in similar situations and confirmed their process for any new notifications.
- Project notifications and details were sent to all MN-MRPC members; information was presented at MN-MRPC Quarterly Meetings and a special meeting; small group briefings were organized; and recommendations were identified. MN-MRPC review and comments centered on the mission of the MN-MRPC, National Scenic Byway Intrinsic Qualities, and unique qualities of the Great River Road. The Commission's preference is to talk with proposers early in the process and to use an introductory template of information about the MN-MRPC/Great River Road and byway recommendations followed by more detailed comments as appropriate.
- Details on the three projects reviewed in FY 24 are provided below.
- Northland Reliability Project –
  - Construction of 140 miles of new 345 kV transmission line & replacement of 40 miles 230 and 345 kV transmission lines. From Iron Range Substation near Grand Rapids to Big Oaks Substation near Big Lake.
  - Potential impact centered on proposed crossings of the Great River Road, at Itasca County Road 3 and Crow Wing County Road 11.
  - Comments were approved and submitted. The MN-MRPC recommended that the core content be used as introductory comments for future projects.
- Dairyland Wabasha Relocation Project –
  - Relocation of approximately 14 miles of 161-kilovolt (kV) high voltage transmission line (HVTL) and construct a new substation in Wabasha County
  - A Zoom briefing was provided for MN-MRPC representatives by project contacts early in the process and the MN-MRPC representatives provided Great River Road introductory information and requested visual simulations and additional project details. No further concerns or comments were noted by the MN-MRPC after receiving the simulations and details.
- Lotis Environmental Bowstring Lake Telecommunications Project –
  - Proposed construction of a new telecommunications tower near Ball Club Lake on Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe lands. The MN-MRPC submitted comments noting understanding of the need for the tower, concern about visual impact and suggesting mitigation via camouflage tower options. Project proposers noted the cost prohibitive nature of the camouflage tower options and approval given by the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe after their review of the project. The MN-MRPC did not submit any additional comments.

## **Media/Information Responses**

- MN-MRPC staff and members responded to requests for information. Examples included individual requests for Great River Road attraction information and route directions and maps for community events.

## **National MRPC**

- MN-MRPC members serve in leadership roles for the National Mississippi River Parkway Commission. John Anfinson currently serves as Pilot Pro Tem of the National MRPC, and Anne Lewis as Pilot Emerita. Minnesota was represented on Technical Committees by Peter MacDonagh and Carol Zoff (Transportation); Megan Christianson and Kate Carlson (Marketing); Marni Karnowski (Environment, Recreation & Agriculture); David Kelliher and John Anfinson (Culture & Heritage).
- Six MN-MRPC members and technical advisors participated in the Annual Meeting of the MRPC in Illinois, September 2023. MN-MRPC members shared a success story presentation on Drive the Great River Road Month partnerships.
- The National MRPC Stewardship Award was presented to the Minnesota Department of Agriculture/Minnesota Grown for their sponsorship and leadership of the 2022 Drive the Great River Road Month Fall Harvest campaign.

- The MN-MRPC participated in the Summer Fun on the Great River Road promotion through outreach to partners and communities and sharing on social media. Minnesota partners provided information on a wide variety of events and gained exposure for their communities.
- The MN-MRPC began planning to host the 2024 Annual Meeting in Winona including outreach to potential locations, site selection, convening a host state planning team, and agenda development.

### **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 operating budget for FY '24 was \$78,000. Approximately 90% of the budget was spent during the fiscal year, the first of the biennium. Remaining funds carried forward into the second year of the biennium will be utilized in FY 25 with the first priority being costs related to hosting the National MRPC Annual Meeting in September 2024.
- **MnDOT:** MnDOT provides staffing support for the Great River Road through a designated Great River Road Program Manager; and hosting of online mapping for Great River Road navigation and visitation.
- **Minnesota Transportation Alternatives Program:** Local Great River Road communities sought funds for projects through the Minnesota Transportation Alternatives Program. MnDOT identified ten projects with benefit to the Great River Road and provided information on project intent. The MN-MRPC reviewed the project summaries and approved letters for projects that moved forward with full proposals. MN-MRPC conducted outreach to local applicants and provided five letters of support. The requests, totaling just over \$4.3 million, were for 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 National Scenic Byways Program did not release a Notice of Funding Opportunity during FY 24. Outreach to partners will take place when the next funding opportunity is announced.
- **Additional Letters of Support:** Letters of support were provided for the City of Sauk Rapids and City of Brainerd, as they sought funds from multiple sources for projects that would improve the Great River Road byway traveler experience.

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

- **Aitkin and Crow Wing Joint Trails Promotion** – A virtual meeting was held for partners from these areas at the request of two MN-MRPC Regional Commissioners to begin brainstorming joint trail promotion ideas.
- **Aitkin River Trails Committee** – A representative provided a presentation at a MN-MRPC Quarterly Meeting.
- **Southern Minnesota Tourism Association** – The MN-MRPC Director met with a representative of the Southern Minnesota Tourism Association to discuss potential partnerships.
- **Mississippi Headwaters Board (MHB)** – The Biennial Meeting was attended by Regional Commissioners Karl Samp and Sally Fineday, and the MN-MRPC continues to partner with the MHB whenever possible.
- **University of Minnesota Extension Tourism Center** – Periodic meetings of the Center Director and MN-MRPC Director to share information and discuss partnership opportunities.
- **Community Tourism Outreach:** The MN-MRPC requests and posts Facebook content from local communities.

### **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 the Great River Road regions established in statute; (1) Member-At-Large – appointed by the other 14.

**This report is respectfully submitted on August 22, 2004,  
John Anfinson, MN-MRPC Vice Chair**



**Minnesota Grown/Minnesota Department of Agriculture Receives National Mississippi River Parkway Commission Stewardship Award – November 16, 2023**



**Mississippi River Operation Pollination Partnership Signing Event - April 19, 2024**





## **Drive the Great River Road Month 2023 - Minnesota**

### Goals

- Raise awareness about the Great River Road as part of National Drive the Great River Road Month
- Encourage travel to MN Great River Road communities especially in the fall shoulder season
- Raise awareness of art destinations along full MN GRR route in communities small and large
- Build relationships with MN Great River Road Ambassadors

### Content Development - Partnering with Communities

- Campaign concept developed and led by MN Mississippi River Parkway Commission Regional Commissioners Megan Christianson of Visit Grand Rapids and Kate Carlson of Visit Winona
- Requested "top 3" arts destinations information from MN GRR community tourism offices. Nine of 19 communities responded, and information was included on website and social media.

### MN GRR Website

- Developed new landing page featuring an overview of the arts theme and listing the destinations/events with photos provided by communities and partners.  
<https://www.mnmississippiriver.com/arts-attractions/>
- Did not note significant traffic to page, but content was also used on social media with larger gain.

### Launch/Information Session for Ambassadors

- Zoom Launch Session held for CVBs/Chambers/Interpretive Centers - combination Great River Road Ambassador overview and Drive the Great River Month launch. Possible model that could be continued in future years as an annual session for these Ambassador groups.

### Promotional Items & Materials

- Maps, stickers, and lapel pins shipped upon request to partners and provided to MN-MRPC members for use during September and beyond.
- Digital assets available upon request, courtesy of Visit Grand Rapids.

### Press Release

- Distributed to state and local media list, Interpretive Centers, Community Tourism Offices, state arts organizations and MN-MRPC members.
- Articles included – Grand Rapids Herald Review, Winona Post, Minneapolis River Current.

### Governor's Proclamation

- Requested and received proclamation calling out September as Drive the Great River Road Month in Minnesota. Posted on MN GRR Facebook page.



## Social Media

- MN-MRPC Facebook –25 posts throughout September using content provided by community partners, total reach of over 18,000. Highest unpaid reach for past Drive Month campaigns was 5,300.
- Top posts – Winona Smaczne Jablka Apple Fest, Lake City arts attractions, kick-off Drive the Great River Road Month announcement.
- Posts and shares from MN-MRPC member agencies and partner communities including Dept. of Agriculture, Explore Minnesota, Dept. of Transportation, Visit Lake City, Visit Little Falls, Grand Rapids Chamber, Visit Grand Rapids, Visit Winona and more.

## Kick Off Event

- Drive the Great River Road Month announcement and booth hosted by Visit Winona at "Mississippi Sippin" event, Minnesota Marine Art Museum, August 31. Drawing for Great River Road prize package and giveaways from Visit Grand Rapids, Visit Winona, and MN Great River Road.

