



Minnesota Mississippi River Parkway Commission
1st Quarter Meeting – February 24, 2021
Zoom Virtual Meeting
MINUTES – Draft

Commissioners Present

Megan Christianson – Grand Rapids to Brainerd
Karl Samp – Brainerd to Elk River
John Anfinson – Elk River to Hastings
Jennifer Weaver – Hastings to Iowa Border
Sen. David Senjem
Rep. Kristin Robbins
Rep. Emma Greenman
Paul Hugunin – Agriculture Appointee
Lisa Havelka – Tourism Appointee
David Kelliher – Historical Society Appointee
Grant Wilson – Natural Resources Appointee
Marni Karnowski – Transportation Appointee
Anne Lewis – At Large Member

Technical Advisors/Staff Present

Gina Bonsignore – Natural Resources
Carol Zoff – Transportation
Tim Wilcox – Transportation
Craig Hansen – National Park Service
Diane Henry Wangensteen – LCC
Sandy Most - LCC
Chris Miller – MN-MRPC Staff

Members Absent

Sally Fineday – Lake Itasca to Grand Rapids
Sen. Patricia Torres Ray

Meeting called to order at 2:30 p.m. by Chair Senjem. Roll call was taken with the members listed above present. There was a quorum. New members were welcomed to the meeting and introduced themselves – Representative Kristin Robbins, Representative Emma Greenman, NPS Technical Advisor Craig Hansen, and newly elected Metro Regional Commissioner John Anfinson.

Approve Minutes from 11/19/20 Meeting: Motion by Anne Lewis and seconded by Grant Wilson to approve the minutes from the November 19, 2020 meeting as presented. Motion carried.

Election of Officers: Karl Samp facilitated the election of officers, which happens approximately every two years. Megan Christianson nominated Anne Lewis to continue in the position of Treasurer, with no other nominations noted. Motion carried. Anne Lewis nominated John Anfinson for the position of Vice Chair, with no other nominations noted. Motion carried. Marni Karnowski nominated Sen. Senjem to continue in the position of Chair, with no other nominations noted. Motion carried. Officers were thanked for their service and the meeting was turned back to Sen. Senjem as Chair.

Budget Report: A year-to-date budget report was included in the meeting packet. The annual dues invoice to the National MRPC should be arriving soon, which will be a \$15,000 expense. There are more funds than anticipated remaining in the budget due to pandemic related changes in plans and travel. Karl Samp shared information and made a proposal to enter a partnership with River Travel Magazine for digital ads and articles for a cost of approximately \$1,368, followed by discussion. Members were in favor of proceeding, with Karl Samp noting that he has been following River Travel Magazine and Lisa Havelka reporting that Explore Minnesota is in discussions with them as well. There was also conversation about the fit and timing with the All-American Road designation. Digital package details that were presented will be sent out to members via email.

Motion by Lisa Havelka and seconded by Megan Christianson to approve the digital partnership package with River Travel Magazine using available FY 21 funds as proposed, with two digital ads and four blog articles. Anne Lewis requested that the campaign focus on the All-American Road designation. Motion carried.

Legislative Report: Sen. Senjem reported that this is a budget year at the legislature and that the Commission should be cognizant of this and work with LCC on the budget for Fiscal Years 22 and 23. Budget needs should be reviewed by the MN-MRPC Executive Committee and a draft developed by staff for FY 22. Diane Henry-Wangensteen noted that the Legislative Coordinating Commission met earlier in the day and that operating funding for the MN-MRPC is currently being proposed at levels steady with the current biennium.

All-American Road Designation: Anne Lewis congratulated all eight Great River Road states that received news of their new designations last week and noted the dedication and professionalism of state transportation departments and

partners in getting the nominations completed and submitted. The Great River Road was the only new national designation in Minnesota, and the Great River Road accounted for eight of 15 All-American Road designations nationwide. Core criteria are national significance and the byway being a destination unto itself. Members of the project team provided a review of the process and commented on the challenges and approaches. The MN-MRPC and partners along the byway were thanked for their help with the nomination. A news release has been distributed to the MN-MRPC's media list, an announcement was posted on Facebook, and information with a request to share was sent to the MN-MRPC's marketing and distribution partners along the route. MN-MRPC members were asked to share information within their agencies, regions, and groups. Sen. Senjem suggested a letter and news release from Senate and House members to their chambers. Members were also asked to send their favorite river stories, locations, and photos to the MN-MRPC office for use in the All-American Road celebration. MnDOT is considering development of a new online story map/digital travel guide as well.

Byway Grants: Funding has not been available through the National Scenic Byways Program for several years but \$16 million will be available in 2021. Details and grant solicitation information are not yet available. The National Scenic Byways Foundation and Scenic America are working to solidify more funding for Scenic Byways moving forward. If these organizations request letters of support, the MN-MRPC Chair could act at his discretion or convene the Executive Committee. Carol Zoff provided background including examples of funding received in the past. The MN Great River Road Corridor Management Plan includes many strategies that could be a fit for a grant application moving forward. MnDOT has created a budget line item to receive any grant funds that may come to Minnesota. Questions were raised about how this nationwide \$16 million compares to past years. Carol will provide a summary of MN byway grant projects funded in the past to be shared with members as meeting follow up.

MRPC Board Report and 2021 National Meetings: Anne Lewis, National MRPC Pilot, announced that the 2021 MRPC Semi-Annual Meeting will be held virtually on April 14. Interpretive Centers will be featured and there will also be a focus on the Mississippi River flyway.

National MRPC Committee Updates: Lisa Havelka reported for the Marketing Committee – recent discussions have focused on All-American Road promotion and a possible new signature/branding approach for the designation. The Pilot's Wheel logo would remain as the main Great River Road identifier. John Anfinson reported for the Culture & Heritage Committee – he has virtually visited all 90 Great River Road Interpretive Centers and is working to achieve a quorum on the committee so votes can be taken on new Interpretive Center nominations. Marni Karnowski is now Minnesota's representative on the Environment, Recreation and Agriculture Committee, has reached out to the committee chairs to introduce herself and is excited for the upcoming Semi-Annual MRPC Meeting. Tim Wilcox provided an update from the Transportation Committee – updated Great River Road route alignments are being requested from each state as well as GIS sign locations. The committee's page on the MRPC members website was noted as a source for information including individual state All-American Road nominations.

Letter of Support Request – City of South St. Paul Wakota Scenic Trailhead Project: The City of South St. Paul has requested a letter of support as they seek Federal Recreational Trail Program funding for the Wakota Scenic Trailhead Project. Other sources of funding include the Federal Lands Access Program, City of South St. Paul, Dakota County and potentially the National Park Service. The construction and trail connection will provide direct access to the Mississippi River along with amenities such as restrooms, picnic facilities, bike repair station and water fountains. John Anfinson, Regional Commissioner, described it as one of the major boat launches between St. Paul and Hastings, and a worthwhile project. He also consulted with National Park Service representatives who have been involved.

Motion by John Anfinson and seconded by Karl Samp to provide a letter of support for the Wakota Scenic Trailhead Project. Motion carried with DNR abstaining from the discussion and vote due to their role with the Federal Recreational Trail Program.

St. Anthony Falls Disposition Study Update: John Anfinson reviewed the background, which started in 2014 when Congress passed an act to close the Upper St. Anthony Lock to navigation. The National Park Service/Mississippi National River and Recreation Area took over visitor management at the lock. There are many visitors including international visitors. Friends of the Falls has raised \$5 million for a visitor center which could reach one million visitors per year. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers currently has a draft disposition study posted for public comment through March 18. The Tentatively Selected Plan in the study would be for the USACE to have no continued presence or ownership of the site, with ownership to be transferred to another entity. There are organizations and groups encouraging a continued Corps presence. Concerns include tourism, flood mitigation, and potential impact on water supply due to aging structures under the falls. There is strong potential for promoting the Mississippi River and Great River Road if a visitor center is included in

the future of the lock area. Consideration of a comment letter from the MN-MRPC was requested. Focus would be on support for plans that best capture the tourism potential and protection for the significant resources of the area. It was suggested that any such letter ask for consideration of byway intrinsic resources as part of the decision-making process and keep that as the theme. It was also noted that language would need to be carefully considered so as not to conflict with any comments of member agencies.

There was general agreement to proceed with a letter of comment on the Upper St. Anthony Falls Disposition Study. A draft will be sent to members for review and the decision on whether to submit will be made by the Chair after evaluating feedback from members.

University of MN Tourism Center Follow Up: Chris Miller reported on a phone call with Dr. Xinyi Qian to discuss next steps on items from the presentation at the November 19 meeting. Three items are on the list for further consideration: 1) Potential for Tourism Center participation as a technical member of the MN-MRPC if there is interest and a process to do so (referred to Executive Committee), 2) Assistance with outreach to and involvement of more diverse audiences (dependent on outcomes of MN-MRPC work group, and 3) Potential for a Great River Road Impact Study (review of similar past studies needed followed by development of possible scope). Follow up on these topics will continue.

MN GRR Website: Chris Miller reported that pricing has been obtained for edits and page additions for the MN Great River Road website launched in early 2020 and the work will be starting soon. Pages to be added include Ambassador Development and All-American Road.

Ambassador Development: Tim Wilcox reported on instructional videos currently being developed at MnDOT to guide the public through the features of the Plan Your Trip online tool. Audio has been scripted and recorded, and samples were played for the Commission. Video of the screens and mouse movements will be added next with the timeline estimated at 4 – 6 weeks. The video resources will be important tools for Ambassador Development. Next steps also include development of a web page to house resources including a collector app link for updates to Plan Your Trip, pilot information sessions for ambassadors, and GRR promotional items for use by ambassadors.

Improving Access and Welcoming Environment along the Mississippi River: The work group of Sally Fineday, Sen. Torres Ray and David Kelliher met on February 1, discussed several ideas for messaging and outreach, and identified four next steps – 1) Presentation to the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council on February 17 for an MN-MRPC overview and invitation to consider Regional Commissioner positions (thank you to Sally Fineday for presenting); 2) Request agenda time for a presentation to the Minnesota Council on Latino Affairs; 3) an inventory to collect information on what MN-MRPC member agencies are already doing to be more inclusive; and 4) development of metrics so progress can be measured. The work group will reconvene after items 1 – 3 are completed. The council presentations are a result of emails sent by LCC last fall in advance of MN-MRPC regional meetings/elections. David Kelliher noted that the Commission's work needs to be reflective of communities and that it will take time and effort to get out there and listen. The work group will continue its efforts.

Member discussion and suggestions –

- Karl Samp recommended making sure that people of color are reflected in marketing materials, website, and social media.
- Craig Hansen volunteered to help and share ideas based on his work at Grand Portage National Monument in partnership with the Grand Portage Band and past work with other parks and tribes. Recruiting people as the next generation of park rangers was an important focus.
- Sen. Senjem suggested approaching the Rochester Area Diversity Council to offer a presentation about the MN-MRPC/Great River Road. A road show or Zoom presentation "This is the MN GRR" would be helpful. Carol Zoff mentioned using the MN-MRPC orientation presentation outline and Gina Bonsignore recommended pulling from regional meeting content.
- Grant Wilson spoke about the DNR's experience forming relationships and story partnerships for different languages, and the importance of reaching out where people are. He offered to assist with MN-MRPC efforts and suggested considering funding to help support implementation.
- Carol Zoff suggested looking into adding a translator function to the website.
- Gina Bonsignore asked about spending a little money on Great River Road ads in diverse communities.
- Anne Lewis noted that the Leech Lake Band has an electronic newsletter and suggested exploring opportunities for ads or content. There could be others around the state too.

- Paul Hugunin indicated interest in identifying how to connect with communities where English is not the first language – this is something applicable to agriculture as well – emerging farmers, assisting with licenses and permits, etc. It is important to have a strategy and not a scattered approach.

Other Business and Discussion:

- Gina Bonsignore referred to the DNR report in the meeting packet, a resource for current Minnesota State Park status and information that all members are free to use.
- Karl Samp raised a question about the LCCMR's timeline and process for funding decisions. The Brainerd area has a project under consideration – Brainerd Trailhead Regional Park. Sen. Senjem offered to check with the Senate Committee chair, and Diane Henry-Wangensteen noted that the committee met earlier in the day regarding Senate File 690. Video is available online.
- Lisa Havelka reported that Explore Minnesota's public relations lead received a request for information from USA Today picking up on All-American Road designation. There will potentially be a Great River Road feature in late April-early May.
- Jennifer Weaver shared that American Cruise Lines is planning 22 stops in Winona from three vessels in summer of 2021. Winona County Historical Society and their tour guides are working with the cruise operator and this is a great opportunity for the local community to welcome new visitors.

Next Meeting: May 27, 2:00 – 4:30 p.m.

Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 4:45 p.m.