



Minnesota Mississippi River Parkway Commission 2020-21 Annual Report (July 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021)

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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.
- 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 13, 2020; November 19, 2020; February 24, 2021; and May 27, 2021. All meetings were held virtually via Zoom.
- The Executive Committee met virtually on September 2 and November 10, 2020.
- Meeting materials and recordings 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. Activities and approaches during 2020-21 were revised due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on travel and partners.

Projects & Activities

All-American Road Designation

- Notification was received in February 2021 that the MN Great River Road was awarded the All-American Road designation by the Federal Highway Administration.
- An information and celebration campaign began in February and will continue into FY '22. The Commission distributed news releases, created a new webpage about the designation, and implemented a four-season digital article series with River Travel Magazine. News coverage included the Bemidji Pioneer, Duluth News Tribune, Aitkin Independent Age, Twincities.com/Pioneer Press and Mill City Times.
- The project team of John Anfinson, David Kelliher and Carol Zoff continues to provide guidance.

MN Great River Road Website

- A phase two website project took place in follow up to the launch of a new site in early 2020. Tasks included improved mobile device friendliness, general edits after evaluation of new site, and creation of new pages focused on All-American Road status and the MN Great River Road Ambassador Program. The project team of Lisa Havelka, Megan Christianson and Carol Zoff continued to provide guidance through the process.
- Site data from July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021 included 16,724 sessions and 23,365 page views during the year with highest levels related to Drive the Great River Road Month.

MN Great River Road Print Map

- Maps printed in spring of 2020 were distributed based on response to outreach or individual requests rather than following the past pattern of mass shipments. Needs and capacities of partner continue to vary.
- 12,700 maps were shipped in summer of 2020 to Explore Minnesota Welcome Centers. 16,625 maps were shipped to 27 distribution partner locations in May 2021. Additional shipments were also fulfilled as requested.
- 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.

Plan Your Trip Interactive Mapping

- The Plan Your Trip online resource mapping, managed by MnDOT, continues to be available to the public via www.mnmississippiriver.com. Updates to resource listings are made on a regular basis.
- A series of "how-to" videos were developed by MnDOT to assist the public in accessing the many features of the mapping and resource listings. Demonstrations were provided to the MN-MRPC during the year. The videos are in the final stages of being added into the Plan Your Trip system and will be available by fall 2021.

Ambassador Development

- Goals of Ambassador Development are to 1) provide potential Ambassadors with resources, materials, and training; 2) strengthen byway attraction partnerships with the MN-MRPC; and 3) confirm/revise Great River Road attraction information included in Plan Your Trip and other tools.
- Initial target audiences are defined as Great River Road Interpretive Centers and community tourism offices. Information sessions will also be provided for MN-MRPC members as primary Great River Road Ambassadors.
- The project team of Tim Wilcox, Carol Zoff and Chris Miller focused on developing tools and products for use online or in person in FY 22 and beyond; and a pilot online training session to begin the rollout process.
- A new web page was developed for the MN Great River Road website that provides an overview of the program and will include links to resources. The Ambassador Development process will also gather feedback to update and maintain the 700+ resources on the Plan Your Trip mapping. A collector app and survey are in development by MnDOT, with access to be available on the Ambassador webpage.
- Materials developed for the program launch include presentations providing a ten state and Minnesota Great River Road orientation and overview of information tools available; and fact sheets with more details on various topics that can be accessed as needed.
- Promotional items were researched, test quantities obtained and evaluated, and then implementation quantities purchased for distribution to and use by Ambassadors beginning in FY 22.
- The pilot presentation for the program was targeted to Interpretive Centers, the initial audience for the program. The presentation will be revised based on feedback received prior to rollout to Interpretive Centers, MN-MRPC members and community tourism offices.

Regional Meetings/Elections

- Two virtual regional meetings and elections were held per MN Statute 161.1419.
- The Bluffs (Hastings to Iowa Border) Meeting was held on November 16 and the Metro (Elk River to Hastings) Meeting on December 16. Agendas included state and national Great River Road updates, gathering of feedback from regions and elections. Jennifer Weaver and John Anfinson were elected to two-year terms respectively.
- The at-large member election was held at the November 19 MN-MRPC Quarterly Meeting with Anne Lewis re-elected to the position.
- Officers were elected at the February 24, 2021 meeting: Chair – Sen. David Senjem, Vice Chair – John Anfinson and Treasurer – Anne Lewis.

New Member Orientation

- Orientation sessions were held for new members via Zoom on February 23 and March 26, 2021.
- Content included National and Minnesota MRPC overviews, Great River Road information and MN-MRPC operating details.

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 and Carol Zoff (Transportation); Lisa Havelka (Marketing); Marni Karnowski (Environment, Recreation & Agriculture); and John Anfinson (Culture & Heritage Co-Chair).
- MN-MRPC members participated in virtual Annual and Semi-Annual Meetings of the MRPC.

Great River Road Network of Interpretive Centers

- The Itasca County Historical Society was approved by the National MRPC for addition to the Network of Great River Road Interpretive Centers, making it the 13th Interpretive Center in Minnesota.
- Indoor/outdoor wall mount signs were purchased for the Winona County Historical Society and Itasca County Historical Society, as well as a sign for sample/display use by MN-MRPC.
- Interpretive Centers will be the first target audience for the Great River Road Ambassador Program.

Drive the Great River Road Month

- The MN-MRPC promoted the National Drive the Great River Road Month sweepstakes along with highlighting the scenic features from the Minnesota Great River Road's All-American Road nomination as safe travel options during the pandemic. The initiative included a news release, social media posts and partner outreach.
- News coverage included the Bemidji Pioneer, Brainerd Dispatch, Duluth News Tribune, Grand Rapids Herald Review, Mill City Times, EMT Express and River Travel Magazine.
- A print and digital campaign with Minnesota Monthly/Compass Media as part of their "12 Weeks of Autumn" resulted in 4,413 visits to website and over 122,000 ad impressions. The promotion included a print ad, online article, e-newsletter sponsorships, and digital ads.

Access/Welcoming Environment Work Group

- The MN-MRPC began discussion on needs at the August 2020 meeting related to the Corridor Management Plan goal to engage diverse populations of all ages.
- A work group was convened with members Sally Fineday, Sen. Torres Ray and David Kelliher. Tasks – 1) Be intentional about inclusivity in MN-MRPC operations and building long-term partnerships with diverse groups. Build awareness of and partnerships with the MN-MRPC among more diverse audiences. 2) Expand storytelling to invite diverse peoples to share their stories and highlight more complete history and cultural connections with the Mississippi River. 3) Invite diverse travelers to share their Great River Road experiences and the interactions they want.
- Outreach was initiated by the Legislative Coordinating Commission to four councils in fall of 2020 asking for help sharing the word about regional commissioner positions and offering informational presentations about the MN-MRPC.
- Presentations were made to the Boards of the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council and Minnesota Latino Affairs Council to introduce the Great River Road along with the MN-MRPC and its work, invite applications for Regional Commissioner positions, and open the door to future partnerships.
- Next steps are an inventory of member agency initiatives, consideration of metrics so progress can be measured and then development of recommendations for the MN-MRPC.

Media/Information Responses

- MN-MRPC staff, members and agencies responded to requests for information and photographs including the National Scenic Byway Foundation "Byways Information Vault," AAA Living Magazine, and USA Today "Go Escape Midwest" feature.

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 '21 was \$78,000. In addition, \$16,889 in operating funding was carried forward from FY '20 along with just under \$41,000 in special project funds for the website, print map distribution, and the Ambassador Program.
- **MnDOT:** MnDOT provided special project staffing in the form of a SEEDS student worker for ongoing work on the Plan Your Trip and Plan Your Project Interactive Mapping Tools, and development of 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 five project applications along the Great River Road. The requests, totaling nearly \$1.3 million, were trail projects that would improve the byway experience for visitors and residents and help implement the MN Great River Road Corridor Management Plan.

Examples of Local, Regional and Partner Activities or Issues

- **Inver Grove Heights Land and Water Conservation Fund Project Application:** The MN-MRPC authorized a letter of support for this funding application focused on the Heritage Village Park Project along the Mississippi River, which would benefit Great River Road byway travelers.
- **Mississippi Headwaters Board – Paddle Landing Signage:** A presentation was provided to the Commission by MHB Executive Director Tim Terrill on this initiative to install river signage for use by those kayaking/canoeing in the region.
- **University of Minnesota Extension Tourism Center:** A presentation was provided to the Commission by Interim Executive Director Dr. Xinyi Qian. Information was shared and opportunities for future partnerships were discussed.
- **South Saint Paul Wakota Scenic Trailhead Project:** The MN-MRPC authorized a letter of support for this project which would involve construction and trail connection providing direct access to the Mississippi River along with visitor amenities, enhancing the byway experience. Federal Recreational Trail Program funds were requested.
- **Upper St. Anthony Falls Lock Disposition Study:** An update was provided by Regional Commissioner John Anfinson. The MN-MRPC authorized a letter of comment encouraging consideration of byway intrinsic resources as decisions are made on how the lock and associated structures and/or land will be handled moving forward.
- **Brainerd Mississippi Landing Trailhead Park:** \$2.85 million was approved for this project during the 2021 legislative session by the Legislative Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources. Amenities will include an amphitheater, canoe/kayak launch, outdoor classroom and trails connecting to other major area trails.

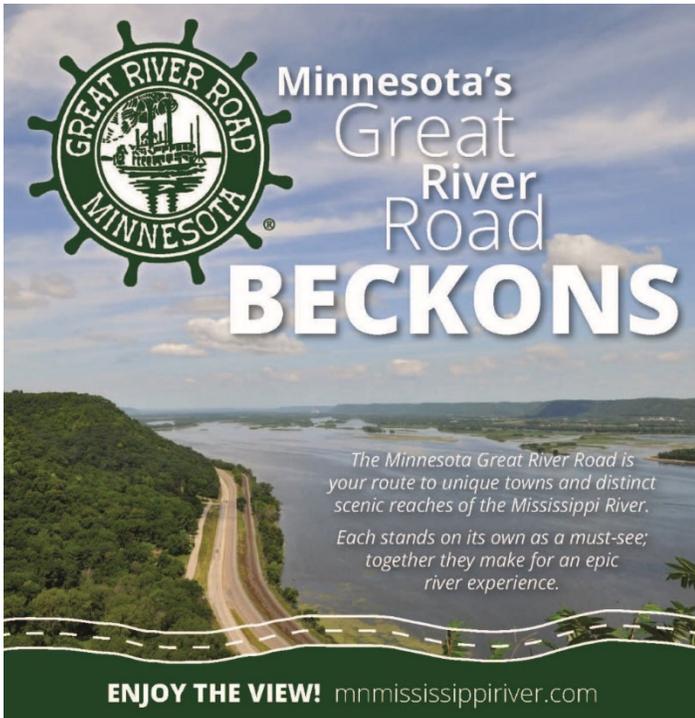
Membership

- 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 Jennifer Weaver, new member elected to represent the Hastings to Iowa Border region; John Anfinson, elected to represent the Elk River to Hastings Region, Marni Karnowski, new member appointed to represent the Department of Transportation, and Reps. Emma Greenman and Kristin Robbins appointed by the Minnesota House of Representatives.
- Thank you to departing members Scott Bradley, Cordelia Pierson, Anne Clafin, Tony Jurgens for their service to the Commission.

This report is respectfully submitted on August 18, 2021.

Sen. David Senjem, MN-MRPC Chair

Minnesota Great River Road Ads – FY '21



GREAT RIVER ROAD MINNESOTA

Minnesota's Great River Road **BECKONS**

The Minnesota Great River Road is your route to unique towns and distinct scenic reaches of the Mississippi River. Each stands on its own as a must-see; together they make for an epic river experience.

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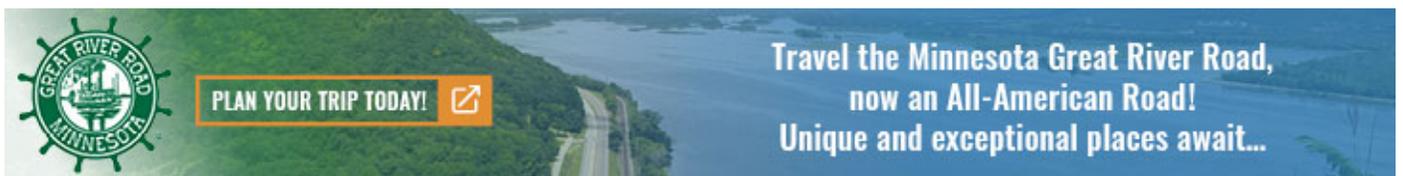
Your route to unique towns & distinct scenic reaches of the Mississippi River!

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Travel the Minnesota Great River Road, now an All-American Road! Unique and exceptional places await...

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Take the Great River Road to Experience Minnesota's Scenic Outdoors

The Minnesota Great River Road is your route to eight scenic reaches of the Mississippi River. Each stands on its own—together they make for an epic river experience

By **Anne Lewis, MN Mississippi River Parkway Commission** and **John Anfinson, National Park Service** - July 22, 2020



This blufftop view shows the Mississippi River and a section of the Great River Road from a distance.

Photo Courtesy MNDot

From Lake Itasca to the Gulf of Mexico, nowhere does the Mississippi River exhibit more diversity of scenic landscapes than in Minnesota. Eight distinct reaches characterize the river as it flows through Minnesota, each with historic towns and cities reflecting its unique topography. An excursion on the 565-mile Great River Road National Scenic Byway allows you to experience those landscapes and communities, and it reveals how the Great River has shaped and influenced the North Star State.

A Quick Look at the Regions

Lake Itasca: The journey of this world-renown river begins at Lake Itasca. But there is more here than the point where the Mississippi River begins. The lake lies within the 32,000-acre Itasca State Park, the second oldest state park in the U.S.

Brainerd: After percolating from Lake Itasca, the infant river follows a serpentine course to Brainerd, frequently twisting back on itself, leaving cut off lands and oxbows.

Headwaters Region: The headwaters region includes thousands of lakes. The largest contribute to the United States' first reservoir system. Created by the Corps of Engineers over 100 years ago, the reservoirs provide a wide range of scenic views.



Photo Courtesy MN
Mississippi River Parkway
Commission

The Prairie River Region: From Brainerd to St. Anthony Falls, the Mississippi becomes the Prairie River as it straightens out and islands replace oxbows. Here, the prairie runs up to the river's banks, not bluffs.

St. Anthony Falls: No place anchors the Mississippi's significance in the Twin Cities like St. Anthony Falls, the river's only major waterfall. Its physical power gave rise to Minneapolis, but its scenic power has drawn nationally known artists since the 1800s and still attracts modern day painters and photographers.

After St. Anthony Falls: Below the falls, the Mississippi drops into the 8.5-mile gorge, stepping down 110 feet through three locks and dams, running between bluffs one-quarter to one-third of a mile apart. Nowhere does the river fall so quickly over such a short distance.

The Big River: The Big River—the river of Mark Twain—begins at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers. It is characterized by a broad valley and a wide floodplain with many side channels, backwater lakes, and wooded islands.

The Driftless Area: After Hastings, the Mississippi enters into the Driftless Area, with its distinctive limestone bluffs. During the last ice age, glaciers bypassed the Driftless Area, creating a unique and nationally significant landscape.



Drive the Great River Road Month

September is Drive the Great River Road Month, which is perfect since the warm glow of fall shows off the colors and foliage of the landscape.

Whether you decide to travel by car, bike, or canoe, you'll appreciate the views, adventures, and new experiences provided to you via the Great River Road and the Mississippi River. Along the river you'll find urban centers, working river ports, and iconic mill towns. In all, the Minnesota Great River Road spans 43 communities, 20 counties, and the reservations of three Native American tribes. Details and online mapping are available at mnmississippiriver.com.



2020 Drive the Great River Road Month – Minnesota

Goals

- Raise awareness of scenic and outdoor opportunities along the MN GRR and in general promote the towns along the route.
- Promote the ten state GRR and sweepstakes.

Governor's Proclamation

- Requested and received proclamation from the Governor's Office, posted on Facebook, sent to MN-MRPC members and to National MRPC Office

Ad Campaign

- Print and digital package with MN Monthly "12 Weeks of Autumn" promotion. Print ad, online article, e-newsletter sponsorships and digital ads.

MN Great River Road Social Media

- Facebook reach September 2 – 29 = 61,817 with 13,580 post engagements.
- Facebook and Instagram ad campaign generated majority of reach and engagement.
- 11 Facebook posts on Great River Road MN. Total reach of posts – approx. 2,600. (2019 – 3,543; 2018 - 3,950). Remainder of reach came from ads.

MN Great River Road Website

- 4,987 users in September compared to 1,212 in August.

News Release

- Release was sent to media list, distribution partners (CVBs/Chambers, State Parks, Interpretive Centers, Welcome Centers, etc.) and MN-MRPC members. A separate release was modified for use by legislative members.
- Articles/Blogs – Bemidji Pioneer, Brainerd Dispatch, Duluth News Tribune, Grand Rapids Herald Review, River Travel Magazine, Mill City Times, EMT Express Industry Newsletter.
- Social media posts including Visit Grand Rapids, Little Falls CVB.

