



## Mississippi River Parkway Commission

701 East Washington Avenue, Suite 202  
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# Full-Participation Plan for Mississippi River Parkway Commission FOR DISCUSSION ONLY

## Situation – Historic and Developing

The 80-year-old Great River Road is overseen and promoted by a federally identified, but loosely constructed, federation of 10 state bodies – legislatively or gubernatorially formed – in the 10 Mississippi River states. Its mission is to preserve, promote and enhance the travel experience and foster economic development through tourism in the river's corridor.

In 2017, New York Times writer Peter Kujawinski proclaimed, “Along the Great River Road, we found a little bit of everything. Heavy industry, civilizations thousands of years old, the horrors of slavery, wilderness, hawks and turtles. And our own personal history as glimpsed through two trips... The Mississippi River is a movable feast, an ancient waterway filled with the ambitions, sorrows and joys of countless lives.”

The Mississippi River is experiencing a tourism renaissance. Multi-modal travel in the U.S. is being redefined, and the American heartland, anchored by the Mississippi River, is the focus of the country's collective introspection. The potential re-funding of the National Scenic Byway program is bringing coalitions together for action. American infrastructure is nearly universally recognized to be in need of restoration and upgrade. It is a time ripe with opportunity for the Great River Road and the 10-state Mississippi River Parkway Commission.

And, because of these developments, the 10-state MRPC finds itself with increased demand to modernize and expand traveler experiences. Mapping demand – both printed and digital – outstrips our financial capacity to meet it. Interpretive centers – and their communities – greatly appreciate expanded promotions and more advertising, as well as vehicles for shared ideas, as many of them are located in small towns with limited tourism promotion resources. Website visits and social media promotion participation increases every year and should be capitalized on. The number of Interpretive Centers grows annually along with raised expectations for small town tourism, especially since 70 percent of Mississippi River towns are under 10,000 and most ICs are located in small towns or rural areas. New methods of mapping and traveling present challenges. And, a new Comprehensive Management Plan lays out priorities for the future of the Great River Road.

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This is a moment in time when the full strength of all 10 MRPC states is needed unequivocally. Full financial support for expanded operations; full expertise participation for the challenges of new forms of transportation and traveler expectations; and full commitment of all 10 states to the newly approved Corridor Management Plan are needed to meet the increasing challenges.

To do this, the 10-state MRPC needs the full participation of its technical as well as commission membership. Right now, however, three state commissions are in arrears in their dues, causing the MRPC to have a 23% budget deficit for 2018. Furthermore, the reduced department of transportation representation deprives the MRPC of valuable expertise and collaboration. Perhaps most importantly, the missing state participation robs the MRPC of valuable perspective and credibility as a voice for the whole Great River Road.

### Why Prioritize Full-State Participation over Other Strategies

Solving the financial deficit alone could be addressed in other ways like raising funds from elsewhere. However, a first principle in fund raising is to have board and leadership support before you ask others to support your objectives. And the second principle is fundraising for deficits is nearly impossible.

Another way to address the lack of participation could be to engage a new, alternative set of partners. But building new partnerships is harder and takes longer than recapturing past participants with whom we are already more closely aligned. Furthermore, convincing new partners to join an organization that's at 60 percent capacity can be a hard sell.

And, lastly, as we look for solutions to the deficit in budget and participation, we need to be mindful of the new CMP and its reliance on all 10 states for successful achievement of the priorities in this plan.

### Proposed Full-Participation Plan

Therefore, the following plan is proposed:

Objective: Full 10-state participation before the end of 2019 and maintenance of that full participation for the future.

Full participation will be defined as the restoration of all 10 states' full-dues payment; 80 % participation of all 10 state commissioners at the semi-annual and annual meetings; and, the restoration of Department of Transportation members by all ten states in attendance as well.

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### Strategy:

Phase 1 – Great River Road trip to personally inform and engage with all 10-state DOT commissioners and authorizing public entities.

Phase 2 – Annual Communications Program managed by the National Office and transportation committee.

### Tactics:

- 10-state information packet that includes the case for state involvement in the MRPC
  - This information is already in the works. It contains:
    - Economic information about the 10 Mississippi River states
    - Benefits sheet for MRPC participation
    - 10-state map
    - Rodney Slater endorsement – if available
    - CMP Executive Summary
    - Pilot's Wheel/Signage Fact Sheet
    - National Scenic Byway Q & A
    - Pilot's Wheel pins
  - The idea will be to provide these in personal, face-to-face visits.
- Schedule of state visits
  - Throughout the Summer of 2019 a joint team of one state official and a 10-state MRPC leader will meet with DOT commissioners and or their top administrative official. The purpose of this meeting, and one with the state's authorizing body, will be to thank them personally for their state's support and inform and answer questions about the Great River Road and its benefits to communities.
  - This will also be a time to thank states for their past commitment or ask states to make a renewed commitment in light of the current situation outlined above.
- Development of on-going State Communication Program
  - The goal of this will be twofold – keep state authorizing bodies informed about MRPC, scenic byway efforts and CMP updates; and to keep MRPC National Office updated on current contact information for these contacts in the various states. This database, centrally located, is key to keeping the state MRPCs functioning and funded.

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- The elements of the Communication Program might include:
  - Bi-monthly member e-newsletters
  - An e-blast system that might be needed from time to time to mobilize partners on transportation issues or keep them informed of our efforts on issues of importance to travel infrastructure everywhere
  - regular CMP updates to gauge progress and show results
  - annual state highlights to keep ALL 10 states' commission members and partners informed and engaged in between semi-annual and annual meetings and regardless of whether they're attending meetings or not
  - National Scenic Byway update newsletter and e-blast, as needed
- Organization changes to address needs of technical partners
  - Semi-annual and annual meeting agendas with at least one specific topic relating to transportation
  - Earlier meeting agenda production to allow for travel arrangements
  - Inclusion of at least one mobile session or general session dedicated to a transportation feature of the road, either in place or planned
  - Integration of CMP and National Scenic Byway updates as a regular semi-annual and annual meeting feature

### **Budget**

Recommendation: The board allocate a portion of the Pilch and Barnet retainer, along with the officers' travel budgets, to meet the goals of this effort. Furthermore, additional travel expense of state MRPC representatives will be needed to compensate for their travel to join meetings in their states.

### **Conclusion**

This plan represents a programmatic approach to MRPC's relations with its member states. It incorporates re-engagement efforts with on-going relationship maintenance efforts to try to prevent future erosion from taking place due to the loss of individual members, political upheavals or other interruptions in the most important aspect of the Great River Road: Its role as THE most accessible travel infrastructure to the Mississippi River in all of the 10 states and the public's access to America's iconic river.

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