**Culture & Heritage Committee Meeting**

**September 17, 2021**

Attending:

Pat Audirsch, Arkansas, Co-Chair

Ann Geiger, Iowa

Jim Janett, Iowa

John Anfinson, Minnesota, Co-Chair

Shelley Ritter, Mississippi

Derrick Biglane, Mississippi

Mark Kross, Missouri

Anne Lewis, Pilot

As mentioned last time, we are looking to answer an important question: *What can our committee do over the next three years to improve the traveler experience on the Great River Road by leveraging the All-American Road designation (AAR)?* In particular, how can we help Mississippi River Parkway Commission’s interpretive centers focus on stories and resources of national significance? And, how can we help them provide the quality of interpretation expected of that designation?

John Anfinson began with the basic question of whether we should focus on the AAR designation or something else.

Shelley Ritter and Ann Geiger raised concerns about focusing too much on the All-American Road (AAR) designation. They asked how many people really know or care about this. Shelley wondered how many people intentionally travel the Great River Road versus having other destinations in mind. John replied that not many people know about the AAR designation, since it is so new, and it could take a few years to make the general public aware of why the designation is so special. He also noted that it changes who we are as an organization, just as becoming a scenic byway did. The comments raised some things we need to think about as a committee and as an organization.

Ann thought the designation could bring funding to our efforts.

John then noted that at the last meeting we discussed direct and indirect ways we could help interpretive centers and promote travel on the Great River Road. He said he was hoping we could share our thoughts about the questions below.

* Do you think the interpretive centers in your state are at the AAR level?
* Do you think they connect with other sites featuring the same stories or resources within your state and in other states?
* Do you have ideas for how to directly elevate those that are not at the AAR level or that don’t connect well to other sites? Direct ways could include working with interpretive centers to bring greater national themes to their river exhibits and making those exhibits more professional. Here, we would focus on an limited number of sites.
* Do you have ideas for we could indirectly elevate or connect them? Indirect ways, for example, includes having the MRPC identify key national stories and resources and then develop rack cards and internet pages that highlight those resources and stories. Here, we could focus on all sites.

Shelley and Ann said we need to think about geographically focused interpretive itineraries as well as itineraries with a thematic focus. Many people are out for day trips and not a long drive. This does not mean we couldn’t come up with itineraries connecting similar sites through multiple states.

Jim Janett suggested we look at Iowa’s County Conservation Boards Facebook page as a model for marketing our 91 interpretive centers. They have used Facebook to promote their 99 counties. While this sounds like a great idea, some pointed out that we’d need someone to manage the effort. Also, Pat Audirsch said state run sites in Arkansas would need state approval for such an effort. Still, we can look into how we feature our interpretive centers on our national website.

Mark raised the concern that many don’t know what it means to be a Great River Road interpretive center, and we could use a program to educate them and create a sense of community among them. He added that we should work with the state tourism offices on this. John noted that Minnesota is rolling out its Ambassador Program to do just what Mark is suggesting. Minnesota’s program could be a model for other states.

As we think about what marketing and programs we advance, Shelley cautioned us to remember that one size does not fit all. This is critical to keep in mind.

Ann suggested we get funding to develop a professional video for our website about who we are and why we matter. John asked Anne Lewis to say something about the Economic Development Administration Travel, Tourism and Recreation grants that we are looking at applying for. Anne noted we are still exploring the possibilities.

Ann suggested we put together a couple paragraphs about the October 5 meeting breakout session and send to all 91 interpretive centers. John has already asked each state to reach out to their interpretive centers to see who might want to join us.

John suggested some ideas for our three-year plan that we could discuss at the October 5 breakout meeting based on what he has heard over the past two meetings. During the first year, for example:

* The committee could get a solid understanding of the breadth and depth of the stories our interpretive centers tell and the quality with which they do so.
* We also need to get a detailed understanding of how the MRPC is promoting and marketing the road and interpretive centers. What all is on our website? How could we make the Itineraries tab more robust?
* We could also develop criteria and expectations for new interpretive centers based on AAR status, recognizing Mississippi and Missouri have applied for AAR designation.
* Based on the above, the committee could develop a list of tasks by which to directly and indirectly help interpretive centers meet AAR expectations over years 2 and 3. We should develop a list under each category and try to prioritize them.

John made it clear that our goal is not to burden interpretive centers but to help them.