**Tom Lee Park**

**Nomination for becoming a Great River Road Interpretive Center**

**Culture & Heritage Committee Comments and Suggestions**

**July 22, 2024**

The Mississippi River Parkway Commission’s Culture & Heritage Committee sincerely wants to work with Memphis River Parks Partnership to see if establishing our first outdoor Great River Road interpretive center is possible.

The Culture and Heritage Committee developed two model nominations. Your nomination not only has to match those in substance and content, it must be an exceptional application to set the precedent for a new kind of interpretive center. This nomination could open a flood of applications by cities with great parks all along the Mississippi River. We need the Tom Lee Park nomination to be the model against which we can evaluate those, especially with regard to Section 1 and 3 of the form.

We can’t add an outdoor park just because it has great outdoor amenities. Many parks along the Mississippi have wonderful playgrounds, gathering spaces and overlooks. We are looking for a level of interpretive content that can match existing interpretive centers.

So this nomination has to make a convincing case with regard to the substance of onsite interpretation and educational programming. In this regard, consider the questions and comments below.

Welcome or Orientation Center

* Describe the building that serves as your welcome or orientation center.
	+ What is its primary function?
* What interpretive exhibits does it have?
	+ What stories do they tell?
* Is there a potential for travelling exhibits?

Outdoor Interpretive Signage

* How many interpretive signs or markers are distributed throughout the site?
* How many square feet of interpretation?
* What subjects do they interpretive signs or markers talk about and in what depth?

Interpretive Programs

* How many onsite interpretive programs does the park host and on what subjects?
* Who do the programs serve and who conducts them?

Specific Comments

Section 1 only had one paragraph, much of which does not address the questions and does not rise to the level of the two models provided.

Section 3 of your nomination does not address the question. Instead, it talks about all the Memphis riverfront parks. This confused committee members. They wondered if the nomination was for Tom Lee Park or all the parks.

Further Thoughts

Again, the Committee wants to work with you on your nomination. To this end, I talked with Julie Davis of the [106Group](https://106group.com/) based in the Twin Cities. The 106Group has experts in the field of interpretation, indoors and outdoors and combinations of the two.

I asked Julie if it was possible to have an outdoor interpretive center? She enthusiastically replied: “Yes. Absolutely. Entirely possible.” She said that outdoor exhibits are a different expression of interpretation.

She pointed out that we are too often locked into ways of engaging audiences that may be inherently biased. How heritage expresses itself may be different depending on whose landscapes and stories are being told. There is an opportunity and need, she said, for more fluid interpretation, distributed across a landscape.

* So we need interpretation delivered in ways appropriate to the site.
* We need to consider what is being expressed and for whom and why.

She stressed that we need focused, conscious interpretation to connect people to place. How you do that is wide open, she said. But, for the Great River Road, it still must fit with the goals stated in Sections 1 and 3 of our nomination form.

Julie and I discussed having a primary structure that centers people, with the bulk of the interpretation happening outdoors. You can have a welcome or orientation center that not only provides logistical information but also gets at why visitors will want to explore the site or park and learn about its stories and, in our case, its relationship to the Mississippi River.

She related that programming is interpretation and can add to what happens outside. That programming can now take many forms.

* Guided interpretive programs.
* Phone or computer apps that interpret a site at different stations.
* Recorded messages at various stations.

The 106Group develops Visitor Experience Plans, with a focus on creating a cohesive experience along trails or within a site. Does Tom Lee Park have one or could it consider doing one?

I see the comments above as continuing our conversation about how to bring Tom Lee Park into the Great River Road’s fold of interpretive centers.

I hope this helps, and please let me know if you have any questions.

Thanks, John

Co-Chair, Culture & Heritage Committee

Mississippi River Parkway Commission