

Mississippi River Road Commission

Prepared for:

Louisiana Department of Culture,
Recreation and Tourism



The Louisiana Research Team



Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by **Marianne Hawkins Marcell**, Research Analyst at the University of New Orleans and **Susan Beal**, Director, Center for Business and Economic Research, Louisiana State University in Shreveport. Assistance was provided by **Melody Alijani**, Assistant Tourism Research Analyst, at the University of New Orleans. Thanks is also given to **Janet Speyrer, Ph.D.**, Associate Dean for Research, College of Business, University of New Orleans for her direction on this project and help with the surveys and economic analysis. Thanks and recognition is also given to the **LSU Public Policy Research Lab** and to **Dek Terrell, Ph.D., Director** of the Division of Economic Development and Forecasting, College of Business, LSU, and Ryan Bilbo, Research Associate, Division of Economic Development and Forecasting, College of Business, LSU for helping with data collection. Recognition and thanks also go to **Chuck Morse**, Senior Advisor to the Secretary of the DCRT and Director of the Division of Mississippi River Road Commission, for his valuable help in providing information and feedback, and for his cooperation and help with the project. Finally, recognition is given to various other members of the **Louisiana Research Team** who provided specific information relevant to the results reported.

Executive Summary

Return on Investment

- The return on investment for Mississippi River Road Commission (MRRC) is 1.36. That is, for every \$1 spent by the state on scenic byways, at least \$1.36 was returned in federal money along with the secondary impact of this new spending.

Return on Objective

- The Mississippi River Road Commission program is currently falling short on meeting its awareness objective. Only 7.6% of respondents to a telephone survey of Louisiana residents who said they were familiar with Louisiana Scenic Byways and attempted to identify a byway by name could correctly identify Mississippi River Road by name.
- Steps toward achieving specific program objectives are currently only partially complete and are not slated for completion until 2010.
- The completion of the corridor management plan is the first step in achieving National Scenic Byway Designation. The Mississippi River Road (MRR) is scheduled to be the second byway to achieve this national designation (by 2007).

Conclusions

- Mississippi River Road was the most frequently named officially designated Louisiana byway, but it was only correctly identified by name by a small portion of the statewide telephone survey respondents. MRRC has not yet met its awareness objective.
- Of those respondents who indicated that they had traveled a Louisiana Scenic Byway, 8.5% indicated they had traveled the Mississippi River Road.
- The Mississippi River Road is the second Louisiana byway scheduled to obtain the national scenic byway designation. The success of the MRRC in getting this designation will be the result of successful partnerships in a number of arenas.

Recommendations

- Upgrade the MRRC website on an ongoing basis.
- Create a marketing/awareness program to help identify the byways, including MRR.
- Develop a method of evaluating recreational travelers at designated points of interest along the MRR in order to provide invaluable information for both byway administrators and for culture and tourism dollar allocations.

Introduction

This report examines the role of the Mississippi River Road Commission in terms of its contribution to the mission, goals and objectives of the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism.

The Louisiana Legislature created the Mississippi River Road Commission (MRRC) during the 2001 regular session through House Bill 560. The Commission was charged with preserving, enhancing and promoting the Mississippi River Road as an historic, cultural, scenic, natural, and economic resource. The original commission was comprised of river road parishes of East Baton Rouge, West Baton Rouge, Iberville, Ascension, St. James, St. John the Baptist, St. Charles, Jefferson, and Orleans.

Act 864 of the 2004 legislative session expanded the MRRC to include the parishes of St. Bernard, Plaquemine, Pointe Coupee, West Feliciana, East Feliciana, Concordia, Tensas, Madison, and East Carroll. The expansion better positions the commission to take advantage of broader initiatives, including National Scenic Byway designation.

The commission consists of twenty-nine members and an executive director. The Executive Director serves at the pleasure of the Secretary of Culture, Recreation and Tourism (CRT). The Governor appoints the commission members.

In 2003, the Louisiana Great River Road (LGRR) a part of MRRC was designated as a State Scenic Byway. Also, in 2003 the commission completed the design for an interpretative plan for the southern portion of the LGRR.

The mission of the MRRC is to preserve, enhance, and promote the Mississippi River Road region in the State of Louisiana.

The objective of the MRRC is to increase awareness of the unique cultural, natural and native resources along the Mississippi River Road corridor by increasing the distribution of collateral materials to a minimum of 25,000 people by 2010.

The goal of the MRRC is to brand the Mississippi River region in the State of Louisiana as a premier heritage tourism destination, thus building awareness, expanding economic opportunity and strengthening place. As stated in the strategic plan for fiscal 2005-2006 through 2009-1010, strategies for achieving this goal include:

1. Complete Corridor Management Plan.
2. Enhance web site to generate more hits and brochure requests.
3. Obtain National Scenic Byway Designation
4. Expand distribution network for brochures both in state and nationally

5. Develop and implement a comprehensive marketing program targeting the drive market, which might include:
 - Hosting FAM trips
 - Print and electronic media
 - Trade show attendance
 - Website upgrade
 - New Collateral Materials
 - Interactive interpretative centers along the river road.
6. Collaborate with MRPC, a national organization that supports national designation for the entire river road from Minnesota to Louisiana.
7. Partner with MRPC on marketing collaborations
8. Create ambassadors programs to educate the Louisiana community about the MRRC

Methodology

The initial research phase of this project began by reviewing the objectives of the Mississippi River Road Commission and by personally interviewing the coordinator of the Mississippi River Road Commission, Chuck Morse. Next, the website was thoroughly reviewed for information regarding the Mississippi River Road Commission. Finally, The Louisiana Research Team conducted a statewide telephone survey of Louisiana residents that included several questions designed to determine the familiarity with and the use of scenic byways in the state.

Interview with Chuck Morse

On July 6, 2005, an interview was conducted with Chuck Morse, coordinator of the MRRC, in his office in the Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism.

Mr. Morse has applied for a federal grant to do a management study for the northern portion of the Mississippi River Road Corridor. Results of the application were unknown at the time of the interview. The most recent MRRC master plan was done in 1997 by an outside consultant. The new plan will also be done by an outside consultant. The northern portion of the MRRC goes from Arkansas to Baton Rouge. That portion of the corridor is currently not being managed by Mr. Morse's department. It needs to be comprehensively evaluated.

Mr. Morse explained the difference between the MRRC and the Mississippi River Parkway Commission (MRPC). The MRRC charge is marketing while the MRPC's charge is preservation as well as marketing. Mr. Morse indicated that the MRRC should also be involved with preservation, but is not formally charged to do that. According to Mr. Morse, Louisiana is not currently active in the MRPC. Louisiana has one commissioner on the MRPC who is also on the MRRC commission.

Website Review

An Internet search was conducted for “Mississippi River Road Commission” using the Google search engine. The Mississippi River Road Commission Website comes up as the third site listed in the search results. A review of the website reveals that the menu selection “Events” or “Attractions” at the top of the page is non-functional and ultimately results in the following message:

Error Executing Database Query

Selecting the parishes at the right-hand side of the home page does provide the “events” and “attractions” information not available by using that menu choice at the top of the page.

Recommendations for Website Information Regarding the Louisiana Scenic Byway Program

1. Schedule regular maintenance on website to insure functionality.
2. Display inviting, positive messages, such as “under construction” rather than “error” messages on undeveloped portions of the website.
3. Assure that the site will be listed first when searching for the “Mississippi River Road Commission” on Internet search engines.

Survey Results

As a means of measuring the MRRC’s objective to increase awareness of the unique cultural, natural and native resources along the Mississippi River Road corridor, The Louisiana Research Team conducted a statewide telephone survey of Louisiana residents that included several questions designed to determine the awareness and use of scenic byways, in particular, the Mississippi River Road, in the state. The survey was conducted by the LSU Public Policy Research Lab during the week of February 20, 2006, using random-digit dialing within the known Louisiana area codes and exchanges. There were 916 responses.

Are you aware of any of the officially designated Louisiana byways?

| Response | Number | Percentage |
|-------------|--------|------------|
| Yes | 413 | 45.1% |
| No | 489 | 53.4% |
| Don’t Know | 14 | 1.5% |
| Valid Cases | 916 | 100.0% |

- 45.1% of respondents indicated some awareness of officially designated Louisiana byways.

Which ones have you heard about? (open-ended)

| Response | Number | Valid Percent |
|--------------------------------|--------|---------------|
| Named Highway/Interstate | 80 | 22.7% |
| Named Parish/City | 72 | 20.4% |
| Correctly named Byways | 57 | 16.1% |
| Named Landmark/Destination/POI | 30 | 8.5% |
| Other | 40 | 11.3% |
| Don't know/Can't recall | 74 | 21.0% |
| No answer | 60 | |
| Total | 413 | |
| Valid Cases | 353 | 100.0% |

- Only 16.1% of respondents who tried to identify the byways correctly named Louisiana Scenic Byways.
- Some of the respondents who tried to identify the officially designated Louisiana byways could have been using the term “byway” as synonymous with the term “highway,” since 22.7% of the respondents did name highway/interstate numbers rather than byway names.
- 20.4% of respondents described where the byway was located by naming a parish or city. At least 8 respondents named Cameron Parish presumably because of the Creole Nature Trail. It is possible that these people also were aware of the byways program, but did not remember any names of byways. It is also possible that some respondents who named parishes were not thinking of byways, but of destination points of interest.
- 8.5% named Louisiana landmarks and/or points of interest such as the Audubon Golf Trail, Lake Pontchartrain, the swamps, Atchafalaya Basin, New Orleans garden district, various plantations and other points of interest. It is possible that the respondents who named Louisiana points of interest were associating the term “byway” with excursion destination points around the state.
- 21% replied “don’t know” or “don’t remember” when asked to name a byway. It is possible that these respondents were not actually aware of the byway program, but answered “Yes” to the awareness question possibly because they thought they should answer “Yes” and consequently, were not able to name a byway. It is also possible they simply did not remember any byway names.

Responses from those who could name a byway correctly:

| Response | Number | Percent |
|---------------------------------------|--------|---------|
| Mississippi River Road Scenic Byway | 27 | 47.4% |
| Creole Nature Trail All-American Road | 18 | 31.6% |
| Jean Lafitte Scenic Byway | 3 | 5.3% |
| Tunica Trace Scenic Byway | 3 | 5.3% |
| Kisatchie Forest Scenic Byway | 2 | 3.5% |
| Toledo Bend Scenic Byway | 2 | 3.5% |
| Bayou Teche Scenic Byway | 1 | 1.8% |
| Lafourche-Terrebonne | 1 | 1.8% |
| Valid Cases | 57 | 100.0% |

Total does not equal 100% due to rounding.

- The response to this question tests the validity of the response to the awareness question. Just 57 (16.1%) of the 353 respondents who attempted to name any of the Louisiana scenic byways could correctly do so. However, of this 57 respondents, almost half (47.4%) correctly named the Mississippi River Road. In other words, Mississippi River Road is the most recognized Louisiana Scenic Byway of those correctly named by respondents.
- Although Mississippi River Road is the most recognized Louisiana Scenic Byway, it was only correctly named by 27 (7.6%) of the 353 respondents who attempted to name Louisiana Scenic Byways. That is, MRRC is not meeting its objective relating to awareness. Future efforts focusing on increasing awareness may help MRRC achieve this objective.

Have you ever traveled any of the scenic byways in Louisiana?

| Response | Number | Percentage |
|-------------|--------|------------|
| Yes | 346 | 83.8% |
| No | 58 | 14.0% |
| Don't Know | 9 | 2.2% |
| Valid Cases | 413 | 100% |

- Of those respondents that indicated awareness of the Louisiana scenic byways, a large majority (83.8%) indicated they had, indeed, traveled the scenic byways in Louisiana.

Which byway(s) have you traveled? (open-ended)

| Response | Number | Valid Percentage |
|--------------------------------|--------|------------------|
| River Road | 25 | 8.5% |
| Creole Nature Trail | 10 | 3.4% |
| Bayou Teche | 1 | 0.3% |
| Jean Lafitte | 1 | 0.3% |
| Tunica Trace | 1 | 0.3% |
| Kisatchie | 1 | 0.3% |
| Named Highway/Interstate | 74 | 25.1% |
| Named Parish/City | 54 | 18.3% |
| Named Landmark/Destination/POI | 26 | 8.8% |
| Other Responses | 39 | 13.2% |
| Don't know/Can't recall | 63 | 21.4% |
| No answer | 51 | |
| Total | 346 | 100.0% |
| Valid Cases | 295 | |

Total does not equal 100% due to rounding.

- Of those respondents who tried to identify the Louisiana Scenic Byway they traveled, 8.5% indicated they had traveled the River Road, 3.4% identified they had traveled the Creole Nature Trail and less than one percent (.3%) indicated they had traveled on the Bayou Teche, Jean Lafitte, Tunica Trace, and Kisatchie byways. As before, the largest percentage of respondents associated the scenic byway with the name of a highway or interstate (25.1%) or with a parish or city (18.3%).

When did you last travel a Louisiana scenic byway?

| Response | Percentage |
|-----------------|------------|
| Last Year | 68.5% |
| 1 to 2 years | 10.7% |
| 3 to 5 years | 11.8% |
| Do not remember | 9.0% |
| Total | 100% |
| Valid Cases | 346 |

- Of those respondents that indicated they had traveled a Louisiana scenic byway, more than two-thirds (68.5%) stated they had done so in the last year.

When are you likely to travel a Louisiana scenic byway in the future?

| Response | Percentage |
|-------------------------|------------|
| This year | 55.9% |
| In 1 to 2 years | 8.2% |
| 3 to 5 years | .7% |
| Not Sure | 20.3% |
| Not Planning to do that | 4.8% |
| No answer | 9.9% |
| Total | 100% |
| Valid Cases | 413 |

Total does not equal 100% due to rounding.

- Of those respondents that indicated awareness of the Louisiana scenic byways, more than half (55.9%) indicated they were likely to travel a Louisiana scenic byway within this year.

Return on Investment

Louisiana Scenic Byways was successful in its attempt to secure federal funding for the corridor management plan mentioned by Mr. Morse in the interview of July 6, 2005. The grant serves all byways in the northern corridor of the state, and benefits the Mississippi River Road, as well.

Return on Investment

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Total Economic Impact by LBP (A) | \$341,156 |
| Average Operating Budget of Scenic Byways 2003 - 2006, including MRRC (B) | \$216,509 |
| Total Matching Funds (C) | \$34,000 |
| Return on Operating Budget (A/(B+C)) | 1.36 |

The average annual budget from 2003–2006 for MRRC is \$134,029. The average annual budget of the Louisiana Scenic Byways program from 2003-2006 budget is \$82,480. Each of these figures primarily covers salary, benefits, and operating expenses of the department. The federal grant that was awarded to the Byways Department in 2006 to evaluate the state byways program and the northern portion of the Mississippi River Road Corridor totals \$170,000 and requires a match of \$34,000 (20%). This grant will be carried out by a private consultant.

Because the LBP and MRRC have been funded by the state and are willing to invest an additional \$34,000, they have been able to attract \$170,000 by the federal government. Applying a government output multiplier of 2.0068 to the federal funds of \$170,000 equals \$ 341,156 which provides a return on investment of 1.36. This is a very conservative return on investment figure for the MRRC because it does not take into account any spending along the byway that may occur by out of state visitors. However, it shows that for every \$1 spent by the state on scenic byways, and the MRRC, in particular, at least \$1.36 was returned in federal money along with the secondary impact of this new spending.

Additional ROI may result because the federal government dollars will be spent to enhance the attractiveness of the MRRC. Because of the increased attractiveness, more visitors may frequent this region, bringing additional primary and secondary spending to the state. This ROI could be measured by conducting a survey at strategic locations along the Mississippi River Road Corridor to obtain information about visitor spending while in the region.

Return on Objectives

The objective of the Mississippi River Road Commission for fiscal year 2005-2006 through 2009-2010 is to increase awareness of the intrinsic cultural, historical, archeological, recreational, natural and scenic resources along the Mississippi River Road by increasing the distribution of collateral materials to a minimum of 25,000 people by 2010.

Steps toward achieving objectives have been identified by the division as stated below. Progress toward each is noted.

- *Complete Corridor Management Plan* – The development of a corridor management plan is currently 75% complete. The portion of the Mississippi River Road from Baton Rouge to the south already has a corridor management plan and, in general, the plan for this byway is more developed than plans for other byways. With the \$170,000 federal grant, the plan will be completed for all byways, including MRRC, by December 2006, according to Chuck Morse.
- *Enhance Web site to generate more hits and brochure requests* – There is a contract in place to enhance the website for the MRRC along with other divisions in CRT. Specific recommendations for the website, as discussed above, should be included in this initiative.
- *Obtain National Scenic Byway Designation* – The completion of the corridor management plan is the first step in achieving this status. The MRR is scheduled to be the second byway to achieve this national designation. (Creole Nature Trail was the first.) Mr. Morse projects 2007 as the earliest possible date for such action.
- *Expand distribution network for brochures both in state and nationally* – Hurricanes Katrina and Rita destroyed some sites featured in the brochures in southern Louisiana along the river, e.g. Fort Jackson. Brochures must be corrected and reprinted before distribution can be expanded as desired.

- *Develop and implement a comprehensive marketing program targeting the drive market, which might include:*
 - *Hosting FAM trips*
 - *Print and electronic media*
 - *Trade show attendance*
 - *Website upgrade*
 - *New Collateral Materials*
 - *Interactive interpretative centers along the river road.*

These steps have not been completed. State budget constraints have limited the funds available to the coordinating office for the MRRC. Further, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita destroyed some of the sites featured in the previously designed brochures and itineraries, making collateral materials obsolete. Redesigning such materials requires time and money and is included in future plans. The website is under development by Netcom and the interpretive centers are in plans to be completed by 2008 - 2010. However, while FAM trips have not occurred, partnerships are being explored. For example, there is a marketing partnership with the Baton Rouge Area CVB to produce a plantation guide to feature the sites along the Mississippi River Road. In addition, byways, including the Mississippi River Road, are being featured as part of the “One Tank Trips” program sponsored by WWL television.

- *Collaborate with MRPC, a national organization that supports national designation for the entire river road from Minnesota to Louisiana - According to Chuck Morse, the MRPC has agreed to hold its board meeting in Louisiana in June 2006. A special session on achieving national scenic byway designation will be held in order to educate Louisiana, and others, on how to achieve this status.*
- *Partner with MRPC on marketing collaborations – According to Chuck Morse, an international marketing campaign entitled Mississippi River Country USA has already been developed.*
- *Create ambassadors programs to educate the Louisiana community about the MRRC – Budget difficulties since Katrina has prevented this action.*

Although Mississippi River Road is the most recognized Louisiana Scenic Byway, it was only correctly named by a small portion (7.6%) of respondents who said they were familiar with Louisiana Scenic Byways. That is, MRRC is not meeting its objective relating to awareness. The five-year objective focusing on increasing awareness may help MRRC achieve this objective.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Mississippi River Road was the most frequently named officially designated Louisiana byway, but it was only correctly identified by name by 7.6% of the statewide telephone survey

respondents familiar with scenic byways who attempted to identify a byway by name. It is highly possible that Louisiana residents travel and enjoy officially designated Louisiana byways frequently, including the Mississippi River Road, but are simply unaware of the byway designation. That is, MRRC has not yet met its awareness objective.

Of those respondents that indicated having traveled a Louisiana Scenic Byway, 8.5% indicated they had traveled the Mississippi River Road.

The Mississippi River Road is the second Louisiana byway scheduled to obtain the national scenic byway designation. The success of the MRRC in getting this designation will be the result of successful partnerships in a number of arenas.

Recommendations

The ongoing upgrading of the MRRC website is needed:

1. Schedule regular maintenance on website to insure functionality.
2. Display inviting, positive messages, such as “under construction” rather than “error” messages on undeveloped portions of the website.”
3. Assure that the site will be listed first when searching for the “Mississippi River Road Commission” on Internet search engines.

Creation of a marketing/awareness program to help identify the byways, including MRR, is essential.

A key component of evaluating the byways program, including MRR, is to accurately measure the use of the MRR by Louisiana as well as non-Louisiana travelers for purposes of recreation. Developing a method of counting recreational travelers to the MRR would provide invaluable information for both byway administrators and for culture and tourism dollar allocations. A method of counting byway travelers could include survey instruments at designated points of interest along the MRR for travelers to complete.