



2016 – 2017 Annual Report Mississippi River Parkway Commission of Arkansas

Greetings from The Natural State! The Arkansas delegation of the Mississippi River Parkway Commission is pleased to present an update and overview of the activities and projects of the state's 10-county Great River Road region that proudly borders the Mighty Mississippi. This report covers the period from October 2016 to September 2017 and includes activities, events and attractions within the 362-mile Great River Road National Scenic Byway of Arkansas.

There is something special about the Arkansas Delta...and our guests to the area sense it when they visit. With a culture and history unlike any other part of the state, the Delta region of Arkansas offers an authentic experience for visitors. Whether it's paddling along the Father of Waters on a handmade canoe, walking/running/ biking across the longest public pedestrian/bike bridge across the Mississippi River, delighting in delicious cuisine or visiting one of the many historic sites or museums in the area, visitors recognize that Arkansas's eastern counties offer a unique, unscripted and genuine adventure. These visitors may be from a bordering state or a country across the globe...regardless, they will find tourism partners at the ready to welcome them to their beloved Arkansas Delta and, before they leave, make them feel like they are part of the family. Because hospitality is a way of life in the Arkansas Delta...we take it very seriously!

Our Mission: The purpose of the Mississippi River Parkway Commission of Arkansas is to preserve, promote and enhance the scenic, historic and recreational resources along the Mississippi River; to foster economic growth and tourism development in the river corridor; and to develop the national, scenic, historic and recreational parkway known as the Great River Road.

Tourism continues to be an integral part of the economy of Arkansas's Great River Road region and the entire state. In March 2017, Arkansas Governor Asa

Hutchinson proudly announced at the Arkansas Governor's Conference on Tourism that the tourism industry had become the #2 industry in The Natural State. Preliminary statistics provided at March's Governor's Conference showed that during 2016, the Arkansas Delta Byways region (which contains 15 counties along the state's eastern border, including the 10 counties included in Arkansas's Great River Road) welcomed nearly 3.3 millions visitors with total travel expenditures of \$782,553,071.

In section two of this annual report, you will see examples of this year's media coverage of Arkansas's Great River Road.

Below is an update on several ongoing projects along Arkansas's Great River Road that continue to bring guests from throughout the state, the region and the world.

- On Oct. 22, 2016, the Governors of Arkansas and Tennessee proudly "cut the ribbon" on the Big River Crossing. The nearly mile-long boardwalk is located adjacent to the historic Harahan Bridge and is considered the longest public pedestrian/bike bridge across the Mississippi River. The project cost an estimated \$28 million, but it will continue to grow as a part of the Main Street to Main Street Multi-Modal Connector project that connects downtown West Memphis, Arkansas, to downtown Memphis, Tennessee. From Oct. 22, 2016, to Sept. 5, 2017, 215,737 individuals crossed the boardwalk. The Big River Trail, a 70-mile graded path atop the Mississippi River levees, can be accessed from the trailhead in West Memphis and allows bicyclists and hikers to travel along levee to near Marianna, where they can continue along the existing Mississippi River Trail route to historic Helena. The Big River Trail is part of a cross-country route that utilizes the levee system from the headwaters of the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico. Upon completion of the entire project, there will be over 1600 miles of trail in the Lower Mississippi alone.
- Work is ongoing on the Delta Regional Park, a part of the Big River Crossing project that will include park trails, views of the Mississippi River, outdoor spaces and as a refuge for wildlife.
- Historic Dyess Colony: Johnny Cash Boyhood Home in Dyess continues to be a major tourism attraction in the Arkansas Delta. As of Sept. 5, 2017, the JCBH had welcomed guests from all 50 states as well as 52 countries. On Oct. 19-21, 2017, the JCBH holds the inaugural Johnny Cash Heritage Festival, a three-day event honoring the Man in Black and the New Deal programs that shaped his childhood in Dyess, the nation's largest agricultural resettlement colony. The event includes a world-class concert in the field adjacent to the Cash Home (with performances by Rosanne Cash, Kris Kristofferson, Joanne Cash, Tommy Cash and Buddy Jewell), Arkansas roots music in the Colony Circle, public presentations, arts and crafts and food vendors, demonstrations, and tours.

- Lakeport Plantation in Lake Village celebrated its 10th anniversary with a reunion of descendants of the Johnson family who owned the plantation from the antebellum period until 1927. Lakeport is one of Arkansas's MRPC interpretive centers and tells a major story of how the Mississippi River played a significant role in moving landowners, enslaved laborers, building materials and other goods and services up and down the river, as well as the strategic importance of the river in the Civil War, and the impact of natural changes in the river on plantations such as Lakeport.
- The town of Wilson continues its efforts to become a tourism destination. Most recently the historic downtown welcomed White's Mercantile. Owned by Holly Williams, granddaughter of the legendary Hank Williams and daughter of Hank Williams, Jr., she brought her immensely popular store to downtown Wilson, and the first time she has opened a store outside her home state of Tennessee. The store's website describes White's Mercantile as "a completely curated shop stocked with Holly's favorite items that she's found while spending much of her life on the highway playing music to adoring fans. Holly's style embodies a modern-day chic simplicity fitted for shoppers around the globe."
- The Delta Heritage Trail State Park (DHT), located near historic Helena, is being developed in phases under the national "rails to trails" initiative, where former railroad lines are converted to pedestrian and bicycle routes. The first 21 miles of trail at the north end of the park have been completed. The compacted, crushed rock trail leads through a shaded canopy of native hardwoods, alongside agricultural fields, and across streams. Wildlife viewing and birdwatching opportunities abound along the route, in the heart of the Delta and the famed Mississippi Flyway. It was recently announced that the Arkansas City trailhead of the DHT, located in Desha County on the southern end of Arkansas's Great River Road, is underway and will include development of a multi-use building designed in the style of historic rail depots. The building will house administrative functions for the park's southern operations, bathhouse facilities, and an open pavilion. Site development of the trailhead will include parking improvements, picnic areas, and two large tent pads for overnight camping, as well as interpretive wayside panels. Estimated completion of the trailhead is summer 2018.

The Arkansas Delta Byways Regional Tourism Association continues to serve as an important MRPC partner by promoting tourism throughout the Arkansas Delta's 15 counties, including the 10 counties that comprise Arkansas's Great River Road.

Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson recently appointed two Commissioners to the Arkansas MRPC. Anna Grizzle, who has previously served on the MRPC, replaced Phyllis Stinson as the Monroe County representative. Stinson resigned her position for personal reasons. Tyler Dunegan replaced Steven Son as the Mississippi County representative. Son resigned his position in May 2017.

Ron Maxwell retired as assistant director of Arkansas Tourism in October 2016. Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism executive director Kane Webb later announced that Kimberly Williams, travel writer for the Arkansas Delta, would take over the role as director of Arkansas's Great River Road. Kim will continue her duties as travel writer for Arkansas Tourism.

Finally, Arkansas looks forward to welcoming members of the Mississippi River Parkway Commission to West Memphis in October 2018 for the annual meeting. The proposed dates are the week of Oct. 22-26.

Respectfully submitted,

Joe St. Columbia, Chairman

Kimberly J. Williams, Director