

Great River Road gets Byways boost

Lifts W. Tennessee tourism hopes

By Richard Locker

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NASHVILLE -- West Tennessee's 185-mile stretch of the Great River Road has been added to the federal government's America's Byways program, raising hopes for more tourism dollars in communities along the route from Memphis to the Kentucky border.

The U.S. Department of Transportation designated three Tennessee roadways into the America's Byways network last week -- raising Tennessee's total to five.

The other two byways listed last week are the East Tennessee Crossing, from Cumberland Gap to the North Carolina border, and Woodlands Trace, which bisects Land Between the Lakes in Tennessee and Kentucky.

Included with the Great River Road's designation is an \$80,000 grant to develop a unified branding campaign and mark the various roads that make up the route through five West Tennessee counties.

"This puts us on the map in more ways than one," said state Sen. Mark Norris, R-Collierville, whose district includes four of the five counties. "It acknowledges the significance of the recreational, historic, educational, cultural and economic benefits of our region and enhances our ability to market the best of West Tennessee and all its communities have to offer."

The Great River Road traverses roads on both sides of the Mississippi through 10 states. Tennessee has lagged behind the other states in promoting the corridor over the years and its former designated route, U.S. 51, has been altered significantly with the new designation.

The route now follows U.S. 51 north from Memphis, cuts west toward the river at Halls on Tenn. 181, then Tenn. 79 and Tenn. 78 to the Kentucky border. It also features several spur routes over to the river itself.

America's Byways was created by Congress in 1991 with the National Scenic Byways Act to help recognize, preserve and enhance selected U.S. roads. The program also seeks to promote tourism and economic development.

Tipton County Mayor Jeff Huffman, chairman of the Mississippi River Corridor Tennessee, a Memphis-based nonprofit that led the push for the Byways designation, said the listing gives counties along the corridor opportunities to apply for far more federal grants to help improve access and promote resources.

"It's the first time in 11 years that Tennessee has had a new National Scenic Highway designation, so that's big," he said Monday.

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AMERICA'S BYWAYS IN TENNESSEE

■ Great River Road: 185 miles in Tennessee (part of 2,069 miles through 10 states from Minnesota to Louisiana) through five counties. Designated last week.

■ East Tennessee Crossing: 83 miles from Cumberland Gap along U.S. 25-E and U.S. 25 across Clinch Mountain, Cherokee Lake and Douglas Lake to the North Carolina border near Del Rio, Tenn. Designated last week.

■ Woodlands Trace: 43 miles in Tennessee and Kentucky through Land Between the Lakes (Kentucky Lake and Lake Barkley). Designated last week.

■ Cherohala Skyway: 44 miles in Tennessee and North Carolina from Tellico Plains, Tenn., across the mountains in the Cherokee and Nantahala National Forests into North Carolina. Designated an America's Byway in 1998.

■ Natchez Trace Parkway: 440 miles through Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi between Nashville and Natchez, Miss. Designated in 1996.

■ Arkansas has three America's Byways and Mississippi has two.