

# Nature Based Tourism/Outdoor Recreation Highlight Mississippi River Cruise

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ALTON - Creating a vibrant, active outdoor recreation area along the Meeting of the Great Rivers National Scenic Byway in southwest Illinois is key to the revitalization of downstate Illinois.

The inspiration behind the River Connections Mississippi River Cruise on board the Spirit of Peoria paddle-wheeler Wednesday afternoon is to engage with regional and state leaders about the importance of a regional approach to the outdoor recreation industry for visitors and residents. Currently, 17 states in the country have a dedicated

Office of Outdoor Recreation. Regional byway leaders recognize that Illinois should be the 18<sup>th</sup> state to harness the economic and livability power the outdoor industry can bring to Illinois.

“We need to take regional, cooperative approaches to building the destination we need and not just for tourism but also for remote workers, young families, retirees and business and service providers in the outdoor industry,” Cory Jobe, President and CEO of the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau said. “Twenty-first Century communities and regions don’t just create jobs, growth, and revenue – they boost livability. We are committed to creating a regional consortium to do that. Working together, we will present the case for why this region and our great rivers corridor could be an anchor and a foothold for downstate revitalization.”

Jobe will be joined by Karla Flannery, Deputy Director of the Illinois Office of Tourism along with byway community mayors David Goins of Alton, Mike Morrow of Grafton, Mike Pitchford of Elsah, Tom Stalcup of Wood River, Mike Parkinson of Granite City, Dave Hurley of Hardin, and Emily Fortschneider of Brussels. State Rep Amy Elik and State Senators Doris Turner and Rachelle Crowe will also be present.

The Meeting of the Great Rivers National Scenic Byway is a 33-mile corridor along the Mississippi River extending from Hartford in Madison County through Jersey county. The state byway continues up the Lower Illinois River corridor for another 40 miles through Calhoun, Jersey, and Greene Counties.

“Becoming a gateway and regional hub for the outdoor recreation initiative is key to Alton’s continued growth and economic health,” Mayor David Goins said. “I am encouraged to work with mayors along the byway to embrace transformational change for our region and state of Illinois.”

The region’s Scenic Byway Corridor Management Plan was completed in 2007 and is in need of an update. That could include a robust activation strategy that identifies and prioritizes a list of projects that embrace the Mississippi River, outdoor recreation, and preservation. It would also strengthen the region’s brand as an outdoor destination.

An Outdoor Recreation and Livability working group came together during the summer months to begin working on building out activation strategies for new approaches to establishing outdoor nature-based tourism. That included new approaches to public lands access, emphasizing outdoor commerce, outdoor workforce development strategies, and working to incubate and accelerate outdoor recreation businesses.

“Grafton is perfectly situated at the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois rivers to be a key town center as an outdoor recreation destination,” Grafton Mayor Mike

Morrow said. “We are committed to working on these strategies and making them a reality.”

The proposed Outdoor Recreation Task Force would work on: promoting active living lifestyles; ensure conservation and stewardship of public lands and waters; develop and expand Illinois’ multiple cultural and heritage tourism platforms; educate and engage children in the outdoors; facility and ensure recreational opportunities are available; and serve as a point of contact for those concerned about the sustainability of Illinois’ natural landscapes, parks and the livability of communities.