

Murals, Monuments And More Part Of Route 66 Revitalization In Southwest Illinois

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ALTON - Community murals, a new Route 66 Visitor Center, Mother Road monuments and reopening the historic Cannonball Jail are interlocking pieces of a revitalized Route 66 envisioned by the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau of Southwest Illinois

The Tourism Bureau has applied for a grant under the Route 66 Grant Program administered by DCEO and the Illinois Office of Tourism. If approved, the grant would

fund the projects throughout communities along the Last 100 Miles of the historic highway in Illinois. The grant funds are available to certified Destination Marketing Organizations in Illinois who represent and promote the Mother Road.

“In four years, Route 66 will celebrate its centennial birthday. We want to be part of the Illinois and national celebration with a new and exciting stretch of the Mother Road in southwest Illinois,” Cory Jobe, President/CEO of the Tourism Bureau said. “We have plans that include investing in four interlinking projects that highlight the history, diversity and opportunities that Route 66 continues to provide to communities in rural America today.”

Those projects include:

- The West End Service Station, 620 St. Louis St., Edwardsville, retrofitted in to a new state-of-the-art educational museum and Route 66 Visitor Center. The building was once a service station along Edwardsville’s portion of Route 66 and serving as a stop for travelers to re-fuel and make small purchases. When Route 66 bypassed Edwardsville in 1965, the building was transformed into a dental office until it was sold to the Illinois Department of Transportation in 2021.
- Development of a Mural Trail to create 11 postcard-style, matching murals that highlight Route 66 facts. These would be placed in 11 southwestern Illinois communities including Virden, Girard, Carlinville, Litchfield, Staunton, Hamel, Edwardsville, Collinsville, Livingston, Granite City and East St. Louis.
- “Six on 66” Monuments. These monument attractions will be unique metal structures clearly visible on Route 66 and designed to draw visitors into the communities. The monuments will serve as a photography waypoint in each town and will be a beacon for instate social media sharing. Monuments would be placed in Carlinville, Litchfield, Edwardsville, Collinsville, Granite City and Hamel.
- Historic Macoupin County “Cannonball Jail”. Grant funds would be used to complete structural updates and parking lot repairs needed to reopen the historic jail to Route 66 visitors. The jail, located across from the famed “Million Dollar Courthouse”, was constructed after the American Civil War with surplus cannonballs placed between stones to make prisoner escape impossible.

“The City of Edwardsville is pleased to support this great grant opportunity in our region,” Edwardsville Mayor Art Risavy noted. “This grant will provide a unique opportunity to stop on Route 66 and to visit a vintage custom petrol station like the ones formally found along the Mother Road. The timing of this is fantastic as we approach the 100-year celebration, and we see this as an economic opportunity for our city.”

The interlinking projects support the regional approach to tourism the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau has promoted over the years. The project also includes sites

strategically located in small town business districts which will in turn drive visitors to restaurants and retail storefronts. It is also designed to increase the amount of time and dollars travelers spend in Illinois communities prior to crossing the state line to Missouri.

“Regionalism is the key to success with tourism campaigns,” Jobe said. “No single town can win on its own. Regional destination marketing and development highlights the charm, appeal and recreational opportunities of our communities and creates a destination appealing to the 25 million people located within a three-hour drive of the area.

“We would also like to acknowledge the commitment from area legislators including State Senator Doris Turner, State Senator Rachelle Crowe and State Representative Katie Stuart for realizing the importance of preserving Route 66 for generations to come,” Jobe added.

The proposed Route 66 projects have been endorsed by Carlinville Economic Development Administrator Brian Zilm.

“The City of Carlinville is elated to partner with the Macoupin County Board and the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau on this incredible opportunity to benefit the reopening and promotion of the Old Macoupin County Jail. Partnerships between local governments and entities like Great Rivers & Routes will play a critical role in post-COVID economic recovery for communities all along Route 66,” Zilm said.

The Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau is a certified Destination Marketing Organization serving Madison, Jersey, Calhoun, Macoupin, Montgomery and Greene counties and the City of East St Louis in St Clair County. The bureau is dedicated to educating visitors about the region by providing information regarding the area’s history, unique landmarks, recreational opportunities, leisure attractions, special events and scenic marvels.