

Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Receives Two Large Grants, Governor Awards Funds For Historic Route 66 Projects

by Submitted by Governor Pritzker's Office
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SPRINGFIELD - Governor JB Pritzker and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) today announced seven awards, totaling \$3.3 million, through the Route 66 Grant Program. This funding is intended to boost local tourism and attract visitors to the historic Route 66, leading up to the 100th Anniversary of Route 66 in 2026. The local Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau received two grants that totaled \$892,000 and \$600,000. Those are explained below.

“Like so many great things, Route 66 begins in Chicago, travels Illinois, and spreads across the country delighting millions and forming an essential part of our nation,” **said Governor JB Pritzker**. “These investments will enhance visitor experiences and build on existing attractions to ensure Illinois and Route 66 remain vibrant elements of American culture and tradition for many years to come.”

A total of 300 miles of Route 66 weave through Illinois, and the economic and historical impact of Route 66 is felt firsthand in communities across the state. These grants will bolster tourism, education, preservation, and promotion of Route 66, while prioritizing the needs of future travelers by prioritizing projects focused on future transportation and tourism trends such as electric vehicles.

“Illinois is the best place to not only live, work and do business but also visit,” **said DCEO Director Kristin Richards**. “This investment in Route 66 will boost Illinois’ tourism industry and local economies while investing in travelers by promoting EV destinations throughout Illinois.”

| Grantee | Award Amount | Project Description |
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| Bloomington-Normal Area Convention & Visitors Bureau | \$180,400 | Support the research, design, and installation of murals in Lexington, Bloomington, and McLean. Support the installation of EV chargers in Normal and the creation of Route 66 Centennial signs. |
| Choose Chicago | \$142,500 | Support the organizing efforts for the Route 66 Classic Car show and by developing tours in Chicago |

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| Discover Downstate Illinois | \$50,763 | Support the Celebration of Route 66 Festival, featuring the Midwest Drag Racing Series and various musical performances. |
| Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau | \$892,000 | Support the design, engineering, and installation of electric signs and EV stations along with renovations to the Ariston Cafe and a mural project at the Route 66 Skyview Drive. |
| Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau | \$600,000 | Support the Route 66 statewide marketing and promotions, including projects like the Route 66 Scenic Byway Visitors Guide, festivals, and more. |
| Heritage Corridor Destinations | \$1,250,000 | Enhance Route 66 exhibits and museums, including signage, kiosk, and EV stations. |
| Springfield Convention & Visitors Bureau | \$232,000 | Development and installation of structures for the Illinois Fair Grounds Route 66 Experience. Enhance the World's Largest Route 66 sign as well as the construction and installation of other classic neon signs throughout Springfield. Support the preservation of oral history and audio recordings for future Route 66 attractions and preservation efforts of the Lincoln Information Center. |

Route 66 is one of the most famous roads in America, and it serves as an important historical and cultural symbol. Route 66 was designated in 1926 as part of the new numbered highway network and grew to be one of the most well-known and travelled highways. The construction of Route 66 helped make the Western part of the United States accessible to anyone with a car, while generating economic benefits for many communities along the Route.

“The historical and economic impacts of Route 66 are prominent across the state,” said Senate Assistant Majority Leader David Koehler (D-Peoria). “These investments

play a critical role in our continued efforts to boost tourism across Illinois, while simultaneously showcasing our commitment to clean energy.”

The State of Illinois continues to prioritize its tourism industry as millions of visitors spend billions of dollars annually across Illinois, boosting economic development and supporting jobs in the industry. Illinois reached its highest-ever hotel tax revenue figures in FY23 with \$308 million - surpassing the pre-pandemic record in FY19. Additionally, Illinois welcomed over 111 million visitors who spent \$44 billion in 2022 - representing 14 million additional travelers spending \$12 billion more than calendar year 2021.

“Southwestern Illinois is filled with a rich history and hidden gems built for exploration by visitors from near and far,” **said House Assistant Majority Leader Jay Hoffman (D-Swansea)**. “By investing in the historic Route 66, the State of Illinois is prioritizing our world-class tourism industry while promoting a clean future with critical connections to EV charging infrastructure along the highway.”

The success of Illinois' tourism sector is due to commitment to supporting the industry as well as the Illinois Office of Tourism's award-winning “Middle of Everything” campaign. Data from Longwoods International shows that the campaign had an enormous positive economic impact - leading to an additional 2 million trips which equated to an additional \$1 billion spent in Illinois hotels, restaurants, small businesses, and attractions. Additionally, every \$1 spent on the campaign equated to \$91 in visitor spending while generating \$10 in state and local tax revenue for every dollar spent - an enormous return on investment.