

CENTER FOR REGIONAL COMPETITIVENESS



New Elements in a RiverLands Tourism Strategy

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Meeting Overview

Regional business and economic development leaders gathered on May 18 to review the state of tourism in RiverLands and explore ways to seize new opportunities. Meeting participants described the tourism industry in RiverLands as full of significant attractions, but also full of untapped potential. The National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium in Dubuque highlights the region's great potential, but this significant new attraction is not yet fully connected to the rest of the region's tourism assets. Participants agreed that the region must come together to drive forward in areas in which it has a competitive edge. Because tourism synergies cross state lines and critical mass is essential to creating a strong tourism "brand," participants agreed that they should work at the regional scale to seize strategic opportunities in tourism. As one example of the region's potential, Chicago may host the 2016 summer Olympic Games; this could be a golden opportunity to attract international visitors to RiverLands. To live up to its potential, however, participants indicated that the region must unite internally in order to market itself externally. Through such concerted effort, leaders believe RiverLands can become a highly reputed, world-renowned tourist destination.



Strategic Assets

Meeting participants identified a number of areas in which the region has a distinct edge in tourism. These include the following:

- **Eco- and Agri-Tourism** -A legacy of small farms dotting the countryside
- **Food and Drink** -Wineries and craft beer makers
- **Scenery/Driftless Region Bluffs** -Scenic bluff lands, unique geology, birding
- **History** -Mississippi River, mining, Catholicism, geology
- **Faith/Catholicism** -Father Mazzuchelli
- **Experience** -Cycling and hiking

- **Museums** -National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium
- **Entertainment** -Festivals, art, theatre, music, bars
- **Mississippi River** -Museum, Great River road

Tourism Strategic Options

After taking stock of their current assets, leaders in regional tourism explored a new plan to seize opportunities in tourism. The meeting identified three major strategic options. The challenge ahead is to prioritize them and craft a strategic framework to integrate them.

1. Establishing a Regional Identity & Branding

RiverLands must establish a strong regional identity based on the shared competitive advantages and interdependencies that distinguish it from other regions. RiverLands must also engage in regional branding, meaning it must find a compelling way to bundle its tourism competitive advantages within one strong brand. As a first step, meeting participants indicated that a defining name for RiverLands would be critical. This name would serve as a point of reference and attraction for tourists from afar. Possible names put forth by the group include the *Riverlands Region*, the *Driftless Region*, the *Hills and Bluffs Region*, and the *National Mississippi River Bluff Lands*. Most agreed that it would be wise to incorporate the word “National” into the final choice in order to convey the true significance of the region’s unique tourism assets.

2. Creating a National Designation

Meeting participants agreed that the region has two signature tourism assets: the Mississippi River and the driftless geology, with its scenic river bluffs and other distinct topographical features. A critical question is how best to lift up the visibility and national recognition of these unique features. Leaders strongly supported the proposal to create some sort of national designation for the region. The easiest path to such designation would likely be a National Heritage Area; a tougher path would be to create a National Park, made difficult since so much of the land is privately owned. Overall, the national designation would emphasize many of the region’s selling points: the Mississippi River, the beautiful scenery, storied ties with antiquity, and the opportunity to explore nature. The bottom line is that the words, “National Heritage Area” make a big difference with many tourists, giving them good reason to give RiverLands a crucial first look.

3. Cross-State Funding Mechanism

One of the region’s competitive advantages is the wide range of tourism offerings across the 14-county area. Powerful synergies can emerge from connecting the dots between these offerings. Tourists, especially those with well-defined interests, want full information about nearby attractions, not just those contained within a single state. That said, collaboration is difficult because tourism promotion today is heavily driven by state organizations whose activities stop at the state line. Emerging wine trails in the region, for instance, simply stop at the respective state line. Participants agreed that joint funding for RiverLands tourism activities is essential to overcome this overall problem. One practical way of doing this may be to obtain a federal grant that would provide a focal point for state cooperation. One option that was discussed is to access federal funds in the stimulus package, especially if RiverLands can qualify as a “distressed area” due to last year’s flooding. (The Delta Regional Authority serves as an example of a distressed area that has utilized federal and state partnerships for successful regional development: www.dra.gov). If federal money is secured, RiverLands could then leverage greater support from each of the three states’ tourism offices. RiverLands tourism efforts might be modeled after tourism strategies that have been successful in other regions, such as the Four Corners Region of Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona (see www.explorefourcorners.com).