

Evolution of the Illinois River Road National Scenic Byway

Since its inception, the Illinois River Road National Scenic Byway has worked to write a new “story” for the towns, natural areas and other businesses along its path. Each step along the way has served to position the region as a unified destination and contribute to its overall growth and stability.

The IRRNSB quickly became a model for grassroots byways best practices, and was touted nationwide for its exceptional programs, management and community engagement.

Key stats from the Illinois River Road's evolution:

- 2005: Designated as one of 125 National Scenic Byways through the efforts of the Peoria Area Convention and Visitors Bureau and a steering committee of regional experts in economic development, tourism, history, nature, etc. This status allowed eligibility for special resources, support, and competitive grant funds.
- The organization’s Corridor Management and Interpretive Master Plans serve as “blueprints for action,” providing a working thematic framework and project prioritization for the organization and its partners from a 10-county region that included 40 communities.
- Initial supporting players included The Nature Conservancy, Tri-County Regional Planning Commission, Peoria Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, then-Congressman Ray LaHood’s office, Illinois Lt. Gov. Pat Quinn’s office, the Illinois River Coordinating Council, the North Central Illinois Council of Governments, University of Illinois Extension Office, Community Foundation of Central Illinois and the Heartland Partnership.
- 2006: Management of the IRR moves to the Economic Development Council and a full-time staffer is hired to oversee it and run day-to-day operations.
- 2007: IRR steering committee becomes a board of directors. The current logo is unveiled in August 2007 on road signs and in collateral materials to come. Cohesive branding efforts over the following years, using federal and state grant funds and partner investment, include:
 - Launch of website in 2008 (Wins "Best Tourism Website" – 2009 Illinois Excellence in Tourism Awards)
 - Installation of Waypoint Kiosks that help visitors navigate the Byway and identify key sites and communities along the route.
 - Production of printed materials including Map & Discovery Guide, Road Trip Guide, Guide to Birding Sites, Conservation in Action pamphlet; pocket-sized, portable maps
 - Creation of videos that showcase the region to potential visitors, including focus on individual communities and businesses
 - Launch of a Mobile Tour* that enables smart phone users to easily navigate Byway Communities
 - Installation of 46 (of 350 statewide) branded bike racks placed at trailheads and sites along Illinois’ Scenic Byways throughout the state.
 - Launch of Geocaching* program with 90 caches hidden throughout the Byway region and the publication of a Geocaching Pocket Guide. Participants were able to purchase six collectable coins. (Ran for 5 years beginning in May 2011 resulting in 11,300 documented visits.)
 - Publishing of "Recipes from the Illinois River Road" a partnership with a local artist/author that featured 60 Byway businesses.
 - Publicity garnered from having an established, regional brand includes media coverage throughout the country, including local newspaper articles that have been picked up by

the Associated Press and travel magazines, plus an 8-page spread in *Midwest Living* magazine and promotion by AAA, Rand McNally and National Geographic.

- Paid advertising in *Midwest Living Magazine*, community and regional visitor guides, and many other local, regional and state publications in order to promote visitation to the Byway region.
 - Use of ever-expanding social media channels including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. "Scenic Snapshot" photo contests introduced to drive engagement on these platforms.
- 2016: IRR receives 501c(3) status

As times and budgets have changed over the years, the IRR has not had a paid staff at the helm as of mid-2015. However, the organization is currently operated by a team of dedicated volunteers and utilizes grant funds and partner investments for professional assistance with ongoing business and promotional needs.

**Indicates a program/service that is no longer active*