

For Immediate Release

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Highway 51 Ribbon Cutting and Celebration

Highway 51 is the ribbon that ties the north and south, creating a link between the people along Highway 51 and a pathway for travelers to explore the many cultures, cuisines and nostalgia of Wisconsin. On May 15th at 10:00 AM Wisconsin will begin the journey with a statewide simultaneous ribbon cutting and celebration.

Each community will celebrate in a special way. You can join the Columbia County celebration on May 15th beginning at 10:00 at Commerce Park in downtown Portage.

Fifteen communities along Highway 51 have come together, with the help of a \$40,000 Joint Effort Marketing (JEM) Grant from the Wisconsin Department of Tourism, to help travelers rediscover the joy of the journey. This project will provide travelers with passports, journey journals, a website and a "Best Of" contest.

A traveler can begin the planning process with a stop at the website, www.ExploreHwy51.com. This website will be packed with information about each community including attractions, businesses, lodging and dining options, historical notes, and a calendar of events. To keep the kids busy, and adults too for that matter, a special section called Road Games will offer downloadable activities that can be played during the trip. There's even geo-cache sites located in each community to accommodate those that live by GPS. Future additions to the site will include downloadable stories and audio files relating to life along the highway.

Each community has designated one or two official locations at which a traveler can pick up a Passport and a Journey Journal. The Passport is a 36 page booklet containing information about each community and a place for a stamp. After four stamps are collected a traveler can be entered into a quarterly drawing for one of four fabulous weekend get-a-way packages.

The Journey Journal will help guide travelers along with a map of old and new Highway 51 noting important features such as historical points, museums, classic diners and fun things like large cement animals. Instead of hiring a local guide, this 36 page resource will tell you the little know facts, fun things to do, and interesting things to see.

All along Highway 51, travelers will experience the culture, cuisine and quirks that are part of each community. With each trip there are always a few things that stand out as the best part of the trip. "The Best of Highway 51" contest invites travelers to share their trip experiences online or by filling out a pre-paid card found at points along Highway 51. Twice a year the **Tastiest Dining Experience**, **Best Lodging Experience**, **Funkiest Shop**, **Neatest Photo Moment**, **Most Unusual Architecture**, and **Coollest Place Visited** will be recognized.

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This collaborative effort includes: Visit Beloit, Janesville Area CVB, Edgerton Chamber of Commerce, Stoughton Chamber of Commerce, Greater Madison CVB, Columbia County Economic Development Corporation, Marquette Now, Waushara Area Chamber of Commerce and CVB, Stevens Point Area CVB, Wausau/Central Wisconsin CVB, Merrill Area Chamber of Commerce, Tomahawk Regional Chamber of Commerce, Minocqua-Arbor Vitae-Woodruff Chamber of Commerce, Manitowish Waters Chamber of Commerce and Hurley Area Chamber of Commerce.

The idea for this initiative started several years ago when Darien Schaefer, Executive Director for the Wausau/Central Wisconsin CVB, was approached by representatives from Louisiana at a national CVB convention. Highway 51 stretches 1286 miles from Hurley, Wisconsin to La Place, Louisiana and passes through a total of six states. In July of 2004, those same Louisiana representatives made a trip to Wisconsin to tour Highway 51 and meet in Wausau to talk about a six state cooperative promotional campaign. A meeting of the six states in February of 2005 in Memphis, Tennessee confirmed that there are a million stories and a hundred cultures waiting to be experienced along Highway 51. At this time Wisconsin has taken the lead in this collaborative project by developing the materials for the State of Wisconsin that can be adapted to the other five states.

Highway 51 includes the stories of Abraham Lincoln, railroads, Elvis Presley and Graceland, blues music, industry icons, civil rights, and plantation life. There's a wealth of diverse cultures, traditions, music, and food stretching from the American Heartland to the Deep South. "It's amazing what we've learned about Highway 51 during the course of this project," remarked Schaefer. "We knew we were onto something when our friends from Louisiana found wonder in the simple things that we take for granted." As different as the six states are, so are the individual communities that reside along Highway 51 in Wisconsin. This initiative will allow travelers to pick a section or tour the entire route.

While this program is new, the appeal of Highway 51 is not. In the 1967 edition of "Wonderful Wisconsin," a vacation/tourist book issued annually from 1956 thru 1991, Highway 51 was touted as the "Highway to Happiness." Bob Dylan wrote a song about Highway 51 and Chris Consani paid homage to the highway in his artwork, *Highway 51*. "Our commitment to this collaboration is to grow it," says Schaefer. "We're researching the Scenic Byway Program and other opportunities to attract national attention. We've also received a grant from the Wisconsin Arts Board to preserve the stories, comments, and opinions straight from the people that worked and played along Highway 51. We'll add these captured moments to the website so that travelers can download them and play during their journey."

Schaefer added, "How you get to your destination can be just as fun as the destination itself. The great thing about this program is that it is easy to participate in. The signage is all ready in place. Gather your family and friends, pick up a Passport and Journey Journal, and hit the road."

Starting this May 15th it won't be about the drive... it will be all about the journey.

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