

25E gets scenic byway

From Staff Reports

The stretch of U.S. 25E from Cumberland Gap to Newport received designation as a National Scenic Byway Friday. U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood made the announcement at a ceremony in Washington, D.C.

Five counties in East Tennessee – Claiborne, Grainger, Hamblen, Jefferson and Cocke – have been working since 2003 to achieve the federal designation for the portion of U.S. 25E that runs through those counties.

Benefits of the designation include funding of \$25,000 per year for five years; eligibility to apply for federal competitive grants; America's Byways branding; national and international marketing through the federal program; and technical assistance from National Scenic Byways Program staff.

"My predecessor, Chuck Davis, had the vision to pursue National Scenic Byway designation for 25E," said Maria Fisher, tourism director for the Morristown Area Chamber of Commerce. "After Chuck passed away in 2006, the steering committee continued working on the project. This is such a wonderful tribute to his memory since this designation will help increase visitation to our area and drive tourism development for years to come."

Hamblen County Mayor David Purkey said Friday's announcement was the culmination of a great effort by a lot of people behind the scenes.

"It's a really big deal," Purkey said, thanking those that have put in the time and effort. "It will bring the nation's focus to our area. These byways are heavily traveled."

In applying for the national designation, the steering committee had to demonstrate that the byway has elements of regional and national significance. The roadway – which connects Cumberland Gap National Historic Park to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park – offers regional and national significance galore.

"Our region has such an interesting story to tell travelers," Fisher said. "That's why it was so important for us to be accepted into the national program because it will give our five counties more resources and funding to promote this area to tourists."

Cocke County tourism director Linda Lewanski, representing the five county coalition in Washington said initially the group was told that newly designated byways receive \$25,000 annually for the first five years but Friday "we were cautioned that Congress hasn't passed a budget but we do know there will be money for grants and signage."

She went on to say the local byway will now be listed on www.bywaysonline.org, which receives hundreds of thousands of hits

annually and which will list information from all five local counties.

Cocke County Mayor Iliff McMahan, Jr. said the designation will be a major boost economically because of more tourism, "and that's what we are looking for. So we can showcase our cultural heritage and traditions, as well as the precious resources we have in East Tennessee."

The steering committee for the East Tennessee Crossing Byway will host a local ceremony to commemorate the designation later this fall. Details on that event will be announced once plans are finalized.

Friday's announcement of 42 new designations includes five All-American Roads and 37 National Scenic Byways in 26 states. This increases the number of America's Byways to 151.

"By enriching the National Scenic Byways program with their own unique historical or aesthetic quality, these new additions help our national road system tell our country's story," said LaHood. "These routes continue to offer Americans exciting new opportunities to explore the nation – whether they travel close to home or across the country."

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