

GREAT LAKES CIRCLE TOUR BRIEFING PAPER

Introduction

At its Annual Meeting in November 1988, the Great Lakes Commission approved as a high priority a "Great Lakes Circle Tour" project. The project will promote designation of a binational Great Lakes road system connecting all of the Great Lakes. The road system will incorporate common "Circle Tour" signage and permit development of historical and other place-of-interest elements. The principal purpose of the Circle Tour is to promote tourism in the Great Lakes coastal region. Increased tourism and travel in the Great Lakes coastal region will provide an opportunity for the Great Lakes states and Ontario to showcase the Great Lakes and assist in the development of a positive regional image for both residents and non-residents.

The Commission's role will be that of a catalyst. Initial efforts will include the creation of a Great Lakes Circle Tour Task Force. The Commission's Executive Committee will appoint one or two representatives from each state to serve on the Task Force. Great Lakes Commissioners and state tourism and transportation personnel are the likely candidates for membership. Ontario will also be invited to participate. Commission staff will prepare a concept paper for distribution and review by the Task Force. The paper will discuss existing, individual Great Lakes Circle Tours and potential opportunities and problems with expansion of the concept on a system wide basis. The Task Force will meet two or three times to explore the feasibility of the project and prepare an implementation strategy. Following this, the respective state and provincial agencies will proceed to develop the Great Lakes Circle Tour with Commission assistance.

The Circle Tour Idea

Most person-trips start and end at the same place. The outbound and inbound segments of a journey usually complete a circuit. The "circuit" trip may define a kind of route that entails a geographic focus such as a trip around a Great Lake or within a region. A circuit trip with its geographic focus, becomes a circle tour when the trip purpose is pleasure or vacation and the trip incorporates travel that is planned. Oftentimes, a particular route is identified that includes a common or unifying theme. Historical and cultural places are important elements of such road systems, but scenic beauty is the common denominator.

Scenic roads and highways exist throughout the United States. These roads may be built and maintained as part of the city/county/state/federal roadway network or they may be special roads, created for a particular purpose. Regular roads that traverse visually-interesting terrain and pastoral landscapes or include sweeping vistas of surrounding countryside or have historical connections and provide access to architectural heritage, may be officially designated as "scenic" roads or at least be recognized as such by travelers. Examples of scenic roads include:

- o Highway 1 - Pacific Coast Highway with its cliff-clinging segments.
- o Highway 40 which follows the route of the historic "National Pike" across the Appalachians.
- o The Tamiami Trail (Highway 41) which runs through the vast Florida Everglades swamp and carries the name "Alligator Alley".

Two examples of special scenic roads are the Trail Ridge Road in Rocky Mountain National Park and The Blue Ridge Parkway. The National Park road has the distinction of being the "highest continuous highway" (U.S. 34), with a maximum elevation of 12,183

profit organizations have principal promotion responsibilities. Local events are promoted through the Circle Tour vehicle. Private tourism-based businesses use the "Circle Tour" in their advertising efforts. Route guides are developed and published by non-profit groups. Descriptive materials may be for the entire route or for only segments. A circle tour project/program is successful in developing travel and tourism because of the collective promotional efforts of the many involved communities and organizations.

The Great Lakes Circle Tour

Expansion of the single-Great Lakes Circle Tour idea to include the entire Great Lakes system and perhaps part of the St. Lawrence River will require a careful fusion or incorporation of separate sub-systems. The full region system should be given its own identity but not at the expense of sub-regional circle tour units. Any plan that is developed will probably entail a system of connector routes among existing tour segments. Also the actual regional Great Lakes routing may require more than one designated route. Alternative routes will give the system flexibility for travel purposes and may also result in a geographic configuration much less than "circular". The scenic roadway itself, may only include part of a Great lakes shoreline although the entire coastal reach for a Great Lake will be covered by a scenic roadway.

Development of circle tours requires the cooperation of the local communities. Any change from the status quo may be met with resistance. Legitimate concerns about traffic congestion and excessive use of parks and other tourist and recreational facilities are issues that must be anticipated and resolved. Funding can be a major expense if more than just signage is involved. For example, improvements to scenic turnoffs and the development of historical markers etc., raises the financial stakes. The states/provinces and federal governments will be looked to for such infrastructure improvements.

A Great Lakes Circle Tour may be considered for inclusion in a recently proposed U.S. scenic highway program. In early 1989, "Scenic Byways" legislation was introduced in Congress. This legislation will establish a nationwide system of scenic highways and route segments. Candidate "byways" will be existing roads that have scenic attributes or the potential for development of such. Federal monies for the program will be used for wayside rests, scenic turnoffs, RV parking areas and similar routeway enhancements. The legislation anticipates the completion of the interstate highway system in the 1990's and the subsequent freeing up of some federal highway monies derived from the gasoline tax. A Great Lakes Circle Tour could be a candidate for some federal funding if the Scenic Byways legislation is adopted.