US 23 Heritage Route Management Council
Meeting Minutes

Date: 3-2-2010
Time: 10 am
Location: Maritime Heritage Center

Present: Marlena MacNeill (Alcona County Team), Anne Belanger (Presque Isle County Team), Brian Wagner (Presque Isle County Team), Steve Schnell (Cheboygan County Team), Ken Gauthier (Alpena County Team), Art Laatz (Alcona County Team), Ken Hubbard (Alcona County Team), Dan Mullen (Alcona County Team and MI DNRE), Sarah Waters (Alpena County Team and Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary), Bev Bodem (Alpena County Team and Senator Stamas' Office), Dave Langhorst (MDOT), Greg Sundin (Alpena County Team), Sandy Sokolak (USFS), Carol Lund (Michigan Arts & Culture), Belle Flora (Iosco County Team and Sunrise Coast), Heidi Dewald (Iosco County Team and Michigan Sunrise Tours), David Wentworth (Iosco County Team), Trish Schmidt (Iosco County Team), Jim Baier (Iosco County Team), Mary Ellen Jones (Michigan Arts & Culture Northeast), Brandon Schroeder (Sea Grant), Denise Cline (NEMCOG), Georg Schluender (NEMCOG), and Jim Muratzki (LIAA).

ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR:
Motion by Marlena MacNeill, seconded by Belle Flora, that Anne Belanger be appointed Management Council Vice-Chair. Motion carried.

MINUTES:
Motion by Trish Schmidt, seconded by Ken Gauthier, to approve the minutes of January 5, 2010. Motion carried.

US 23 WEBSITE:
Jim Muratzki, from the Land Information Access Association (LIAA) distributed a website design template and discussed website functionality with the Council. One discussion point was who will keep the website updated. In addition to the staff assistance that the teams and Management Council receive from NEMCOG, there should be one point of contact in each county with the responsibility of website updates. The Council also discussed to whom the website will market to. Some suggestions included anyone who is interested in recreation, retirees who are looking for a place to retire, people who want to develop planned itineraries, people interested in cultural heritage, and people interested in natural resources. One point that came out of the discussion is that the website should emphasize what coastal NE Michigan is not. Georg Schluender discussed the importance of geocaching and earthcaching and other activities which do not cost the traveler money. He noted that the "silent sport" demographic includes 59 million people. In website development, the Council must come up with different hooks to market to different groups of people. It was also noted that website should market to local people as well as travelers (the idea of "staycations").

The discussion continued with what people should see on the first page of the website. Both photographic beauty and a map of the route are important. One important task will be to gather high quality photos to be used on the site. The idea of a photos contest was discussed. Some communities have not had success with that. Dave Langhorst will check with Pete Hanses to see if a staff photographer from MDOT could assist. Anne Belanger also suggested looking at Flicker as a photo source. Brandon Schroeder indicated that Sea Grant has a photo library. Georg Schluender noted that

Jack Matthias has photos from the Thunder Bay Resort that we could possibly access. A subcommittee consisting of Anne Belanger, Brandon Schroeder, Belle Flora, and Heidi Dewald will work together to compile information on existing photo sources.

Another factor to consider in the website is the idea of "looking like someone is home". Social media (such as Facebook and Twitter) should be used to establish these connections, a newsletter could be developed and updated in order to highlight the activities that are being done along the route. The latest current events could be posted (and be constantly updated) on the front page.

An "About" page should exist on the website which explains who is behind the website as well as a general history about the route, how we got to this point, the location, climate visitors should expect, current weather conditions and who to call with questions (i.e. to talk to a live person). This prompted an extensive discussion about what the site would link to and, ultimately, whether the information on the site will be presented on the basis of county boundaries. In the end, the Council agreed that the information on the site should be presented in a variety of methods – by activities of interest and geographic area (both towns and counties could be referenced). People with questions within a geographic area would be directed to either that area's CVB or Chamber and people with questions about a specific activity (bike trails, for example) will have to be directed to an organization with expertise in that area (League of MI Bicyclists, for example).

A discussion also occurred about the categories of attractions that are being loaded onto the site and whether we will end up with too many attractions. Since they all have to fall into one of the four categories (Active Recreation, Natural Resources/Agriculture, Culture/History, or Service), that should eliminate overloading the site. So, for example, hardware stores and government offices would not appear because they are not important to tourists. It was noted that a different term needs to be created for the "agriculture" category because it does not bring to mind farm markets and corn mazes. Jim Muratzki also explained that communities that have already collected information in a spreadsheet could forward that to him. He has also posted a spreadsheet template (on the asset inventory site) that can be used. The specific descriptive information will still have to be filled out for each asset, but at least they can be loaded in all at once.

The group discussed the idea of users being able to post their stories of their travels along US 23. If negative comments get posted, there has to be a way to respond (immediately) to that as well as an editor of the stories. A time limit for outdated stories to drop off the site would also be needed. The US 23 site is very mediated in that they do not allow posting of negative comments. It was decided that the story feature could be designed but not implemented right away until a structure is in place to deal with editing and monitoring.

ECOTOURISM:
George Schluender from NEMCOG did a quick version of his ecotourism presentation for the Council. He explained the concept of Silent Sports and the extremely large target market which northeast Michigan could be tapping into. He also covered the seven key elements of ecotourism.

SUNRISE COAST:
Marlena MacNeill reported for Belle Flora, who had to leave, that the Sunrise Coast will be the featured destination beginning April 1 at Michigan.org, a radio spot with Tim Allen will be taped March 3, and they have raised $40,000, which Travel Michigan will match.

NEXT MEETING: Tuesday, April 6, 2010 (tentative).

Meeting adjourned at 12:20 pm.