

2017 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

Route 66

Statewide



Credit: Landmarks Illinois

Each year, tens of thousands of visitors, spending millions of dollars, explore Illinois on Route 66. These domestic and international travelers are in search of the unique historic character of the “Mother Road,” including neon signs, motels and brick roads. Now 90 years old, the 2,400-mile highway from Chicago to Los Angeles remains an economic force in Illinois tourism despite preservation challenges. Rural economic development resources remain limited and many historic motels and restaurants remain shuttered. While the Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway organization has strengthened the network of resources and

partnerships statewide, the National Park Service’s Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program is set to legislatively expire within three years. To keep the economic engine of Route 66 running, Landmarks Illinois supports active legislation to permanently designate Route 66 as a National Historic Trail.

In the 1920s, the creation of Route 66 gained immediate popularity as the shortest year-round route between the Midwest and the Southwest. As Americans bought cars and journeyed on the highways after World War II, a unique roadside culture of diners, motels and tourist kitsch became synonymous with Route 66. With the creation of the Interstate Highway System in 1956, Route 66 could easily be bypassed and the local economies of communities along the historic route suffered. Despite motels closing and neon signs going dark, Route 66’s popularity continued to grow among domestic and international travelers seeking to have a uniquely American experience along the open road.

To promote tourism and combat the deterioration and loss of the idiosyncratic character of Route 66, Illinois Route 66 was designated a National Scenic Byway in 2005. Recently, leaders and stakeholders along the entire route developed the Route 66 Road Ahead Partnership as a collaborative organization to improve promotion, preservation, education and economic development along the entirety of Route 66.

These initiatives, and local businesses along the road, have been supported by the National Park Service's Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program ([Route 66 CPP](#)). Providing technical assistance, cost-share grants and corridor planning since its creation in 1999, the Route 66 CPP is set to legislatively terminate in 2019, and in the current political climate, it is not expected to be renewed. Recognizing the job creation, tourism impact and small business contributions of Route 66 to the economy, Rep. Darin LaHood (R-IL18) has introduced bipartisan legislation ([H.R. 801](#)) to designate Route 66 a National Historic Trail. This designation would provide a permanent program to preserve, promote and economically revitalize Route 66 if enacted.

In nine years, people from all over the world join in celebrating the 100th anniversary of Route 66. This provides an opportunity to support heritage tourism, preservation and revitalization of the places along the road. At the federal level, Rep. Rodney Davis (R-IL13) introduced [H.R. 66](#) to establish a commission to recommend activities to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Route 66. In Illinois, State Rep. Tim Butler (R-Springfield) has introduced [House Bill 0066](#) to create a centennial commission for Illinois.

If successful, these strategic organizational and legislative partnerships will help prevent the deterioration or loss of another authentic Route 66 motel, diner or neon sign and bring more people to Illinois to get their kicks on Route 66.

What you can do:

- Contact your legislators to support the following bills:

U.S. Congress

Special encouragement to members of the U.S. Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure: <http://transportation.house.gov/about/membership.htm>

- [H.R. 801](#) – Route 66 National Historic Trail Designation Act, Rep. LaHood (R-IL18). Bill and current cosponsors.
- [H.R. 66](#) – Route 66 Centennial Commission Act, Rep. Davis (R-IL13). Bill and current cosponsors.

Illinois General Assembly

- [HBoo66](#) – Route 66 Centennial Commission, Rep. Tim Butler (R-Springfield). Bill and current cosponsors.

Additional Links:

- Illinois Route 66 Scenic Byway: <http://www.illinoisroute66.org/>
- Route 66 Road Ahead Partnership: <https://sites.google.com/site/66roadahead/>
- National Park Service Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program: <https://www.ncptt.nps.gov/rt66/>