

PRESS RELEASE – For Immediate Release

Contact:

Melissa Chrisman, President and CEO

melissa@visitBN.org

309-665-0033

VisitBN Awarded Major Grant to Elevate McLean County's Route 66 Experience

Regional partners join forces to prepare for the 2026 centennial celebration

Bloomington-Normal, IL Feb. 9, 2026 — VisitBN, Bloomington-Normal and McLean County's destination marketing organization, has been awarded a significant Route 66 Centennial Grant from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO). The funding—totaling **\$513,378.00**—will support a wide range of enhancements to Route 66 attractions and visitor experiences throughout McLean County as the world prepares to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the historic highway in 2026.

The award reflects the strong regional partnerships that helped shape the proposal. Key collaborators include the **Town of Normal, McLean County Museum of History, Friends of the Constitution Trail, City of Chenoa, City of Lexington, Village of Towanda, and CORE McLean.**

Transformational Projects Set for Development

Funding from the Centennial Grant will support multiple community-driven projects that enhance, protect, or tell the story of Route 66 in McLean County. These include:

- **Re-Activating Route 66** – Building upon existing infrastructure, the Friends of the Constitution Trail will revitalize segments of trail between Lexington & Chenoa and McLean & Funks Grove for tourism and historic-educational purposes.
- **Cruisin' with Lincoln on 66 Visitors Center Improvements** – Ten panels in the visitors' center and gift shop will be updated from static displays to a dynamic design to highlight Lincoln's career and how it inspired progress through travel, establishing a footprint for Route 66. A new digital wayfinding display will replace the original display near the main entrance on Washington Street, allowing for increased visibility and updated, creative content. The newly established sculpture pad will have lighting installed to highlight the area's "giants."
- **Sprague's Super Service "Full Service" Mural** - The building has been beautifully refurbished and will be a destination space in the Centennial year. To further enrich the space, The Town of Normal will add a mural to reflect the work done in the building during its heyday.
- **City of Chenoa Mural and Signage** – A new mural depicting a classic Pink Cadillac will be painted at the end of a historic downtown city block to create a larger-than-life photo opportunity and the directional and welcoming signage at the intersection of Route 66 and Highway 24 will be updated and refreshed to improve visitor wayfinding.
- **On the Road in the City of Lexington** – A one-mile stretch of original 1926 Route 66 pavement dubbed Memory Lane will be restored to its original glory with new Dogwood trees, refreshed, historic billboards, and then completed with period Burma Shave signs. In addition, a bronze sculpture will be added to the collection of artwork in Lexington to match the existing elephant.
- **Village of Towanda Photo Opportunity** – Towanda is the last McLean County Route 66 community without a monument photo opportunity sign. To get them ready for the Centennial, one will be added at Boyd Wesley Park.
- **McLean Historic Water Tower Mural** – McLean is the final stop in McLean County, and their historic water tower is highly visible. CORE McLean is currently restoring it and plans to adorn it with a creative Centennial themed mural to complement their existing Route 66 attractions.

These initiatives, designed to improve visitors' experience, boost local tourism revenue, and preserve historic structures will position McLean County as a marquee destination during the Route 66 Centennial Celebration.

Leadership Perspectives

"This grant is a powerful example of what can happen when a community works together toward a shared vision. VisitBN and our partners are committed to making McLean County a premier destination during the Route 66 Centennial, and this investment will allow us to create experiences that benefit residents, local businesses, and travelers for years to come." — Beth Whisman, Chair, VisitBN Board of Directors

"This Centennial Grant is a game changer for McLean County. With support from DCEO and our community partners, we are elevating Route 66 experiences for locals and travelers alike. The timing could not be better as global attention shifts to Illinois ahead of the 2026 celebration." — Melissa Chrisman, President and CEO, VisitBN

Strengthening Regional Collaboration

In addition to physical improvements, the grant will deepen collaboration among McLean County attractions, municipalities, and heritage organizations. This unified approach will allow VisitBN and partners to create shared programming, cohesive messaging, and signature experiences that highlight the region's Route 66 legacy.

A Once-in-a-Century Opportunity

Illinois is the first three hundred miles of Route 66, and McLean County hosts some of the most iconic and beloved stops along the historic corridor. As the 2026 Centennial approaches, millions of travelers are expected to explore the Mother Road. The improvements supported by this grant will help ensure McLean County is ready to welcome them.

About VisitBN

VisitBN is the official destination marketing organization for McLean County, dedicated to promoting the region through strategic branding, marketing, sales, and destination services. The organization leads efforts to grow the local visitor economy while enhancing quality of life for residents and showcasing the authentic experiences that make Bloomington-Normal a vibrant place to visit and call home. For more information about VisitBN and Route 66 attractions in McLean County, click to [VisitBN.org](https://www.visitbn.org)