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## Scenic Sumter Heritage Byway meanders through countryside

By Michael McNarney, Correspondent  
April 16, 2014

**BUSHNELL** — With the snip of a ribbon, Sumter County recently joined the Florida Keys and a handful of other regions with designated scenic highways.

The Scenic Sumter Heritage Byway stretches more than 60 miles, starting at the border of Citrus and Sumter counties on State Route 44 and ending near the Van Fleet Trail at State Route 50 near Mabel.

Along the route, the byway passes through Bushnell and Lake Panasoffkee as well as the tiny communities of Rutland and Sumterville.

"It's an opportunity to highlight our natural beauty and our historic heritage too," said Dan McCormic, chairman of the group that has worked over the last four years to make the byway a reality.

McCormic, byway supporters and state officials gathered recently at the Dade Battlefield Historic State Park in Bushnell to mark the designation. McCormic said 62 signs have been erected to mark the route, which was approved last year by the Florida Department of Transportation.

It's Florida's 24th scenic byway and the second in the Lake-Sumter area. The Green Mountain Scenic Byway begins at county roads 561 and 455 near Astatula in Lake and winds south through rolling hills and the communities of Ferndale and Montverde to Tildenville and Oakland in west Orange.

McCormic said he expects the Sumter byway not only to bring more tourists to Sumter but to appeal to guests of current residents — the biggest group of visitors to the area. He said residents of The Villages retirement development also are increasingly interested in the byway and local history.

The byway could eventually tie in with the partly-built Coast to Coast Connector, a cross-Florida bicycle and walking trail that would stretch 275 miles from **St. Petersburg** in the west to the **Canaveral National Seashore** in the east when completed. A final route through Sumter County hasn't been determined, and state lawmakers have not yet voted to fund the remainder of the project, estimated to cost \$42 million.

Now that the state has approved the byway route and it has been marked, the next task for byway boosters is "looking for ways to flesh out the program" along the lines of the nearby Florida Black Bear Scenic Byway, McCormic said. Roughly centered in the **Ocala National Forest**, Black Bear has a web site, a press kit and even an app for smart phone users. For now, the Sumter byway has a Facebook page, and McCormic said he expects to reach

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out in other ways as the byway becomes more popular. He said backers plan to create a website after the byway receives official nonprofit status.

Fishing at Lake Panasoffkee is one of the county's biggest tourist draws, McCormic said, but he hopes the byway will draw more attention to the Dade Battlefield and other historic sites along the route. The battlefield, he said, already draws re-enactors and others interested in the Seminole wars.



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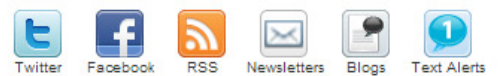
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