

New Mexico prepares for Route 66 centennial — but which route will be celebrated?

By Daniel J. Chacón dchacon@sfnewmexican.com Oct 24, 2023

As New Mexico prepares to celebrate the centennial of Route 66 in 2026, a newly established group charged with recommending projects, events, programs and activities in the state may find itself at a crossroads.

Which route should be commemorated — the original or revised?

The original Route 66, which used to run through Old Pecos Trail in Santa Fe, was established in 1926.

Eleven years later, the route in New Mexico changed. A reconfigured route cut Santa Fe out — and also cut the Chicago to California drive by 107 miles.

According to some accounts, the rerouting was done at the behest of Democratic Gov. Arthur T. Hannett after he lost his 1926 bid for reelection. He blamed powerful Santa Fe politicians for the loss and struck back at them by directing engineer E.B. Bail to build a new route for the highway, Bail wrote in an article in 1952.

Others argued the change was driven by practicality, not political revenge.

The question of which route will be celebrated in New Mexico during the 100th anniversary of the iconic roadway emerged Tuesday when the state Tourism Department appeared before the Legislative Finance Committee to present its budget requests for the upcoming fiscal year.

The department is requesting \$5 million for the celebration.

Sen. George Muñoz, a Gallup Democrat and committee chairman, questioned “which is the correct Route 66” that would be commemorated in New Mexico. “There’s going to be a battle between the cities,” he said.

Lancing Adams, the department’s interim secretary, said a Route 66 Centennial Coordination Group established through an executive order Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham signed last month will likely have to answer the question.

“We’ve thought about that a lot,” he said. “I think it’s within our ability to decide kind of the destiny of the state there and what we want to support, whether it’s kind of the older route, the newer route.”

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Adams said he expects the 12-member group to meet for the first time in the next month or two.

“Essentially, we need to decide what the priorities are along that corridor, from events to infrastructure to marketing — what is that going to look like?” he said. “We need to get with that group to identify what those priorities are going to be so we can communicate those at the national level as well.”

While Adams told lawmakers he believed all 12 members have already been selected, a tourism spokesman said later there are a couple of people whose participation has not been confirmed, and he declined to provide a partial list of the group.

Maddy Hayden, a spokeswoman for the governor, said Lujan Grisham is looking forward to having a variety of perspectives and voices involved in planning the centennial.

“We are proud to be home to part of Route 66 and are excited to celebrate 100 years of its economic and cultural significance,” she said in a statement.

Lujan Grisham’s creation of the coordination group comes after President Joe Biden earlier this year appointed members of the Route 66 Centennial Commission, “which shall study activities that may be carried out by the Federal Government to honor Route 66,” according to the White House.

The commission proposed an interstate consortium among the eight states where Route 66 passes “to enable resource and expertise sharing and coordination,” according to the governor’s executive order.

Jen Paul Schroer, who served as New Mexico’s tourism secretary until the governor tapped her to lead the Aging and Long-Term Services Department in August, was appointed by Biden to serve on the commission. She said the group met for the first time in person in Chicago in May.

“It’s exciting that Route 66 is being recognized at the national level for being an iconic road,” said Paul Schroer, who serves as the commission’s vice chair. “Not only is it a road, but it’s also an economic driver for eight states, and it has a historic significance of how different communities have been shaped over time.”

Asked which route New Mexico should commemorate, Paul Schroer said it’ll be a question for New Mexicans to decide.

“I think that’s what we’re looking for in the engagement with each state, is really what’s important to the different communities,” she said. “Here soon we’re going to have a working group for the state of New Mexico to really dive into those types of questions.”

Adams told lawmakers the commission is “agnostic” about which route New Mexico commemorates.

“I don’t have an answer of what we’re going to focus on,” he said. “I think that’s going to be a task of that coordination group, is to figure out which version of the road to support.”

Adams also told lawmakers the \$5 million request represents his best guess on the funding the state will need, including for potential matching funds from the federal government.

“We want to make sure we’re in line with what [the Route 66 Centennial Commission] is doing but to not lose sight of the unique and important features that New Mexico has with respect to Route 66 versus the other states,” he said.

Randy Randall, who oversees the city of Santa Fe’s convention and visitors bureau, said New Mexico doesn’t necessarily have to choose whether to celebrate the original or revised route.

“So long as we’re clear about the fact that the original route was this and then it was changed to that, it just gives us more to celebrate,” he said. “The more communities that can benefit from any hype that goes with the Route 66 centennial, I’m all-in. I just think we ought to try to make it as inclusive as we can.”

Takeaways

- The New Mexico Tourism Department is requesting \$5 million in the upcoming fiscal year as the state takes part in the 100th anniversary of Route 66 in 2026.
- Route 66, which was established in 1926, runs from Illinois to California and crosses through New Mexico.
- The original route followed Old Pecos Trail through Santa Fe. The New Mexico section of the highway was shortened by 107 miles in 1937, bypassing Santa Fe.