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Mississippi River Corridor group, Fisher & Arnold identify potential of tourism sites

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Ol' man river has been rollin' down the western side of Tennessee for countless thousands of years.

During all those years, humans have left their mark around the waterway in many different places and in many different ways.

Mississippi River Corridor-Tennessee, Inc., figures there are plenty of folks across the country who would spend money to see those marks left by their ancestors.

Those marks could become tomorrow's attractions.

To identify those potential attractions, the nonprofit organization MRCT has contracted with Memphis architecture and engineering firm **Fisher & Arnold**, says Diana Threadgill, program director of MRCT.

"We're very close to finishing the first phase," says David Baker, director of design development for Fisher & Arnold.

The first phase of the assessment began in late 2005. Baker's staff has traveled the back roads, front roads and the highways paralleling the Mississippi River, photographing and mapping.

From the Kentucky state line to the Mississippi state line, Fisher & Arnold employees have visited dozens of sites, ranging from Fort Pillow State Historical Park to Indian sites in the six counties along the Mississippi River: Obion, Lake, Dyer, Lauderdale, Tipton and Shelby.

Last spring, Baker and his colleagues held public hearings in the counties to gather input from local residents about what they thought were the most important attractions in their respective counties.

"They told us about key features they wanted to promote in each county," Baker says. "The resulting list averaged about two dozen sites in each county."

Threadgill says one study estimated that fully developing the Mississippi River corridor as a cohesive tourism destination could cost \$377 million; the MRCT effort is a long-term commitment of 20 years. That same study, Threadgill says, estimated the return to the six-county area could top \$13 billion.

While neither Baker nor Threadgill will divulge the value of Fisher & Arnold's initial contract with MRCT, they both agree the relationship could likely turn into a multi-year partnership.

Threadgill says one potential tourist site along the corridor is also one of the most endangered sites. Fort Wright,

in the riverside Tipton County community of Randolph, is considered to have one of the only remaining Confederate powder magazines, a storage place much like a bunker for gun powder, left in the country.

"It's in danger of falling into the ravine," Threadgill says of the precarious position of the structures built into a steep hillside.

Threadgill says it would be ideal to build an interpretive center near the magazines, which would somehow need to be shored up. In that scenario, she says Fisher & Arnold might be tapped to design a method to halt the erosion.

"We needed a firm with an understanding of engineering, but with experience in all kinds of fields," Threadgill says.

Fisher & Arnold fit that bill because, as Baker says, the firm is "multi-discipline," with expertise in architectural design, engineering, transportation, electrical, landscape and interior design. "We cover it all," Baker says.

The firm produced maps of each individual county and one of the whole corridor; all the features, from historic sites to wildlife refuges and simple, yet dramatic, riverside overlook bluffs, are noted on the maps.

As the project moves ahead, Fisher & Arnold will be called on to help develop plans for both constructing infrastructure -- such as the interpretive center at Fort Wright -- and identifying an actual corridor of connected roads between the various features.

"Part of the challenge," Baker says, "is to find the most logical route to connect the venues within the corridor."

Baker says his firm is finalizing a document about the Mississippi River Corridor to present to the Tennessee Legislature, government agencies and nonprofit foundations that might be sources of funding or partnerships.

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