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National Road celebrating its bicentennial

May events will celebrate heritage of passage

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— CUMBERLAND — Several special events and activities have been planned to mark the 200th anniversary of the “road that built America.” The celebration will begin May 6 and continue through May 8.

The National Road was the first federally funded infrastructure project, and work on the road began in June 1811. Cumberland was chosen as the starting point because of its proximity to the nation’s capital and its already established transportation hub that included the use of the railroad and canals.

According to Dave Umling, Cumberland city planner, the National Road was designed to serve as a “connector” to help unite the growing nation.

“The leaders of our country during that time period were seeking a way to offer safe passage to the Western states in the growing nation,” he said.

Umling has completed extensive research on the topic during the planning process of the National Road Bicentennial. He is just one of many city, county and state officials who is working on the National Road Bicentennial Committee. The committee is collaborating with several area and regional organizations to create an event that honors the heritage of the road.

“The Bicentennial of the National Road will be celebrated in grand fashion thanks to the collaborative efforts of city staff, city and county museum staff and volunteers and community stakeholders,” Cumberland Mayor Brian Grim said.

Tours at area landmarks and museums have been planned, including the LaVale Toll Gate House, the C&O Canal National Historic Park Visitor Center, Gordon-Roberts House, Queen City Transportation Museum, Frostburg Museum, Gilchrist Gallery, Saville Gallery and the Lonaconing Iron Furnace. Walking tours along the C&O Canal as well as various benefit walks and runs have also been planned during the three-day celebration.

The Western Maryland Scenic Railroad will offer special excursions to Frostburg on all three days of the celebration. These excursions will provide riders with a history of the National Road and details on how it helped develop communities along the road.

The Embassy Theatre will offer a special showing of “Stand Up and Fight,” a 1939 movie that recounts the efforts of transporting slaves to freedom. The showing will begin at 7 p.m. May 6.

A wide array of activities has been planned for May 7. The National Road Caravan, made up of antique vehicles and wagons, is scheduled to arrive in Cumberland at approximately 12:30 p.m. The caravan begins in Vandalia, Ill., to follow as much of the original National Road as possible on its journey to Cumberland. The National Road Caravan will present a commemorative gift to the city — a set of wagon bells representing each of the six states linked by the National Road.

The National Road Bicentennial Grand Feature Parade is also scheduled for May 7 at 1 p.m. The Allegany County Department of Tourism is spearheading plans for the parade, which is expected to be among the largest in decades. According to Kim Shirer, director of tourism programs for Allegany County, an impressive lineup of units has already registered to appear in the parade and will include dignitaries from Maryland, Pennsylvania and West Virginia, marching bands, floats, local police and fire departments, motorcycle and car clubs, as well as veterans groups and the Ali Ghan Shriners.

The parade marshal will be determined by an essay contest sponsored in part by the Cumberland Times-News. Another highlight of the parade is the expected appearance of two “movie stars” — Towmater and Lightning McQueen from the Disney animated movie “Cars.” Larry Funk of Tunnelton, W.Va., has recreated these two characters to the delight of fans of all ages.

Following the parade, a groundbreaking ceremony will take place at Riverside Park for a 12-foot replica of an original National Road marker. The base of the monument will house a National Road Bicentennial Time Capsule. The time capsule will be filled with items collected from area children from communities along the National Road. Time capsule items will be on display at local museums until May 8, when the capsule will be sealed for the next 200 years.

The Allegany Arts Council’s annual Arts Walk will also be held May 7 beginning at 5 p.m.

The Canal Place Preservation & Development Authority has coordinated two musical performances and a downtown fireworks display. The Tri-State Youth Orchestra will perform at 5 p.m. and the U.S. Navy Band Country Current will perform at 7 p.m. The evening will conclude with the fireworks show at 9 p.m.

The National Road Bicentennial weekend celebration will conclude May 8 with many activities and tours at area museums.

Grim has played an integral role in the organization of the celebration and encourages everyone to come to Cumberland to learn more about the history and impact of the National Road.

“2011 is an exciting time in Cumberland,” Grim said. “The spirit and heritage of Cumberland are what makes our community unique. Cumberland’s spirit and charm make this a great place to live, and above all else that is a cause for celebration!”

A full listing of activities and events planned for the National Road Bicentennial can be found at www.facebook.com/nationalroad.

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