A gateway to the past becomes important link for future

A gateway to the past becomes a link to the future for area tourism on June 30 as a portion of the Heartland Expressway becomes the “Gateway to the Fossil Freeway.”

On Wednesday at 6:30 p.m., the public is invited to the Wildcat Hills Nature Center south of Gering to participate in a celebration that will include the unveiling of Jan Vissers’ “Nebraska Miocene” mural that will take the viewer back in time millions of years when some of the most unique creatures roamed what is now western Nebraska.

The mural becomes part of a permanent display at the nature center that also includes an exact replica of the "Innocent Assassin," a fossil unearthed in the 1990s near Chimney Rock by Loren Easley. The fossil is of a sabertooth tiger's skull with a fang embedded in the leg of another sabertooth.

A life-size replica of a sabertooth that was commissioned by the Oregon Trail Foundation and created by artist Ron Kephart also joins the display.

Dignitaries at Wednesday’s event include Vissers, who will complete adding animals to the mural before the unveiling; Dr. Kirk Johnson, vice president of the Denver Museum of Nature and Science and author of a new book “Cruisin’ the Fossil Freeway;” and Dr. Beng Chen, chairman of the Friends of Loren Easley. Lt. Gov. Rick Sheehy and Christian Horschaker, director of Nebraska Division of Travel and Tourism will also be on hand.

Marly Sterkel, assistant regional director for partnership for the National Park Service, was in town last week attending a Fossil Freeway kickoff event at Fort Robinson.

Sterkel said he spent most of a day looking at the local tourism-related resources in Gering and Scottsbluff and discussing how the park service could help by sharing resources.

"I’m trying to let people know that we really do care and we want to engage partners," Sterkel said. "Tourism is going to be implemented rather than just talked about."

Sterkel said he foresaw many more joint activities involving the National Park Service and its gateway programs that are part of the focus of NPS National Tourism Council's desire to partner with "gateway" communities.

Scotts Bluff National Monument is designated as one of those "gateway" communities.