

ST. CROIX RIVER CROSSING PROJECT SUPPLEMENTAL FINAL EIS ABSTRACT

The Problem

The Stillwater Lift Bridge is a critical crossing over the St. Croix River between Minnesota and Wisconsin. Built in 1931, the Lift Bridge is an historic transportation structure, important for its innovative engineering, but also as a symbol of Stillwater and the St. Croix valley. The bridge's unique function as a Lift Bridge, with frequent raising to allow boats to travel the St. Croix River, is also a source of traffic congestion in Stillwater and Houlton, Wisconsin, as traffic backs up to wait for the bridge to lower and resume vehicular traffic.

But traffic congestion is not only attributable to the Lift Bridge. The constrained street network in downtown Stillwater, and topographic constraints on the Wisconsin bluff, also contribute to traffic congestion and severely limit any opportunities to improve approach roadways to the Lift Bridge. Traffic on the Lift Bridge has continued to grow, with increased tourism in the St. Croix Valley, and a growing population on both sides of the river. After 70 years of service, the Lift Bridge has aged and has structural, operational, and maintenance issues. The limitations of a two-lane historic bridge, the demands of raising and lowering the bridge, and ongoing maintenance and operations have raised concerns about safety on the bridge as well as on the approach roadways, which are also at capacity and have no room for expansion or improvement within the current constraints.

Over the last three years, Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT), Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), in cooperation with a Stakeholder Group, have studied four "build" alternatives and a "no-build" alternative to find a safe and efficient river crossing over the St. Croix. But the process of resolving transportation needs do not occur in a vacuum: the St. Croix River is also a National Wild and Scenic River, designated by the U.S. Congress because of its remarkable scenic, recreational and geologic values. The Riverway has rare and protected species such as the bald eagle, osprey and Higgin's eye mussel beds, as well as significant wetlands and other water resources. Nearby communities in both Wisconsin and Minnesota, particularly Stillwater, are known for their historic properties that mirror the heritage of the area and provide tourist attractions that are an increasingly important part of the regional economy.

The Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process has resulted in the identification of a "Preferred Alternative" package that best meets the transportation needs with the fewest impacts on the natural, social and cultural environment.

The Preferred Alternative Package

The St. Croix River Crossing Project Preferred Alternative package consists of four elements:

Preferred Alternative river crossing location. The project includes the roadway from the Highway 5/Highway 36 interchange in Minnesota, crossing the St. Croix River, and ending at the 150th Avenue overpass in Wisconsin. The segment of Minnesota Highway 36 proposed for reconstruction begins approximately 1,050 feet (0.3-mile) east of the Washington/Norell intersection with Highway 36 and extends to the St. Croix River. The new four-lane bridge will cross the river at the present location of the Highway 36/Highway 95 interchange, and landing in Wisconsin approximately 6,450 feet south of the Lift Bridge. Wisconsin Highway 35 will be

relocated to the east of its present alignment to provide an interchange with relocated St. Croix County Highway E. Wisconsin Highway 64 will be constructed from the St. Croix River through this new interchange to the 150th Avenue overpass in the Town of St. Joseph.

Preferred Alternative bridge type. The extradosed bridge type was identified for the St. Croix River crossing. An extradosed bridge consists of towers with cables connecting the towers to the bridge deck. The bridge deck is anticipated to be 113 to 159 feet about the river surface and the towers would extend approximately 60 feet above the bridge deck.

Future Use of the Lift Bridge. Under the Preferred Alternative, the Lift Bridge will be converted to a pedestrian/bicycle facility. The Lift Bridge will be a component of a loop trail connecting Minnesota and Wisconsin via the Lift Bridge and new river crossing.

Preferred Alternative mitigation package. FHWA, Mn/DOT and WisDOT, in consultation with the Stakeholder Group, have developed a mitigation package, funded at over \$16.5 million, to address natural, social and cultural impacts. The package includes activities such as wetland replacement and relocation of threatened and endangered species as well as items addressing important visual, recreational and historic resources. Key elements of the mitigation package include bluffland restoration and preservation activities, removal of visual intrusions from the riverway and funding for the long-term preservation of the Lift Bridge. Stakeholder, community and agency participation in development of the project's Visual Quality Manual will also ensure high quality design in all aspects of the project.

The NPS draft 7(a) evaluation indicated that the Preferred Alternative would not have a direct and adverse effect on the scenic and recreational values of the Lower St. Croix Riverway provided there was appropriate mitigation. The process to implement these mitigation items is documented in the Riverway Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). An Amended Section 106 Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) was developed to mitigate for impacts to historic resources as a result of the project. Finally, in order to address the potential negative impacts to area resources from accelerated growth in St. Croix County influenced by the project, mitigation measures were identified to provide support to assist local governments in managing growth through local plans, ordinances and other related tools. The administrative process to implement these mitigation measures is documented in the Growth Management MOU.

Public Involvement. The long process to identify a new, efficient river crossing while having the least impact on the natural, social and cultural environment has benefited from extensive public involvement and comment in the process. The DOTs and FHWA worked with a wide variety of organizations and groups to study and evaluate the options. Groups representing local governments, state and federal agencies, non-profit advocacy groups for the river, the environment and historic resources, and others were asked to serve on the Stakeholder Resolution process as members of the Stakeholder Group to provide input on the project. Public meetings were held to solicit comments on the river crossing alternatives as well as on bridge types that would best respect the visual character of the river valley.

Project Cost.

Total anticipated project cost	\$299 to \$334 million (2004 dollars) for 10 percent to 90 percent bid probability
	\$373 million (2004 dollars) for 100 percent bid probability