

Minnesota Scenic Byways

(A Summary)

The Minnesota Scenic Byways Program was launched by a 1992 memorandum of understanding between the Minnesota Department of Transportation, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the Minnesota Office of Tourism (Explore Minnesota) and the Minnesota Historical Society.

The Minnesota Scenic Byways Program is designed to establish partnerships with communities, organizations and government agencies to match resources with grassroots marketing and economic development efforts. The program exists to: (1) Identify highway routes of exceptional interest. (2) Promote travel and recreation on those routes, and (3) Enhance and provide stewardship for the features that distinguish those routes.

Byway Program Accomplishments

The Minnesota Scenic Byways Commission began soliciting byway nominations in the spring of 1994 and has now designated 21 byways totaling 2,851 miles. Byways have successfully competed for 173 projects totaling \$17,053,577 million in National Scenic Byway Discretionary Grant funds from 1992-2012. On July 6, 2012, MAP-21, the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century was signed into law by President Obama. The passage of MAP-21 eliminated the Scenic Byways Discretionary funding which byways competed for nationally with other national and state byways. In its place, the Transportation Alternative Program (TAP) was introduced which is a competitive process which provides funding for programs and projects defined as transportation alternatives, including on- and off-road pedestrian and bicycle facilities, infrastructure projects for improving non-driver access to public transportation and enhanced mobility, community improvement activities, and environmental mitigation; scenic byways, recreational trail program projects; safe routes to school projects; and projects for planning, designing, or constructing boulevards and other roadways largely in the right-of-way of former Interstate System routes or other divided highways. During the Transportation Alternatives Program; the Minnesota Scenic Byways applied for and awarded \$6,052,781 for an additional 15 projects. On December 4, 2015, the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act replaced the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) with a set-aside of [Surface Transportation Block Grant](#) (STBG) Program funding for transportation alternatives (TA). These set-aside funds include all projects and activities that were previously eligible under TAP, encompassing a variety of smaller-scale transportation projects such as pedestrian and bicycle facilities, recreational trails, scenic byways, safe routes to school projects, community improvements such as historic preservation and vegetation management, and environmental mitigation. The National Scenic Byways Program has served as an impetus for action for local byway groups, state agencies and local governments.

Byway groups have achieved success by integrating byway goals and values with other initiatives and program in their byway corridors. Capital improvement programs by local, state and federal agencies are supported by byway coordination and planning.

Economic Impact

Economic impact studies on two scenic byways, were conducted by the University of Minnesota Tourism Center in 2010, which estimated the annual expenditures by travelers visiting each region specifically because of the byways to be \$21.6 million on the Paul Bunyan National Scenic Byway and \$29.3 million on the Lake Country Scenic Byway.

A Human Resource

While the focus of the Scenic Byways Program is about highway corridors, Commission members have witnessed incredible energy and enthusiasm on the part of volunteer organizations that have prepared byway nominations, completed corridor management plans, created and implemented byway projects, marketed their byways, organized local byway support and tended to day-to-day organizational details.

Often, a few visionary leaders started and led the byway organizations but nearly all byway organizations are sustained by a broad-based group of people representing tourism organizations, private business, local government, local residents and local staff from state, tribal and federal agencies.

On average, our byways have been functioning 20 years, long enough to have established a significant presence in the fabric of their communities. Some byway organizations pre-date the Scenic Byways Program. For example, the Glacial Ridge Trail Association is over 44 years old and the Great River Road and the Gunflint Trail Association are both over 70 years old. They should be considered to be effective partners in local initiatives for state, federal and tribal organizations.

Minnesota Scenic Byways Commission

The Minnesota Scenic Byways Commission was established by the 1992 Memorandum of Understanding between the Minnesota Department of Transportation, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the Minnesota Historical Society and the Minnesota Office of Tourism, now known as Explore Minnesota Tourism. This open-ended MOU was to, "remain in effect for two years pending legislative establishment of a program, or until the agreement is modified or renewed by consensual agreement by the agencies represented on the Scenic Byways Commission."

The Scenic Byways Commission, as established by the MOU, has sustained the Scenic Byways Program for 23 years as it designated 21 state scenic byways, established program policy, supported byway organizations with annual technical workshops, and advocated for byways within their member agencies. Annual byway site visits enabled the Commission to learn about byway attractions, businesses and priorities while providing byway volunteers with an opportunity to discuss local byway issues.

Intrinsic Qualities

Byways are designated because they possess one or more of six intrinsic qualities, including: historic, archaeological, natural, recreational, cultural and scenic qualities. Byway organizations have worked to enhance and preserve these qualities while helping residents and visitors to learn about and enjoy the intrinsic qualities of their byways.

Livable Communities

Byway organizations are comprised of residents who have a passion for their byway and community. Most are active in local community initiatives and understand that the byway experience for locals and visitors are closely aligned. The local community features that typify livable community objectives also support tourism and visitation. Byway organizations present a resource that can provide valuable assistance in the planning and implementation of livable community improvements.

Evolving Scenic Byways Mission

Tourism promotion and the establishment of scenic byways as distinct tourism destinations has characterized the Minnesota Scenic Byways Program to this point. As the program developed in Minnesota, active involvement by local tourism industry individuals, organizations and businesses provided the driving force for scenic byway nominations, development and marketing. This was supported by Explore Minnesota Tourism at the state level, involving partnerships with the Minnesota Historical Society, and the Department of Natural Resources. Funding, national marketing and technical support from the National Scenic Byways Program encouraged the development of the state scenic byways programs through a tourism marketing model.

Federal Highway Administration proposals for future transportation funding are characterized by a consolidation of programs and increased state discretion in planning and spending. Strategic FHWA goals specifically target: (1) transportation choices, (2) improved transit, (3) improved pedestrian and bicycle networks, and (4) improved access to transportation by special needs populations. While FHWA funding proposals do not eliminate funding for eligible activities in the National Scenic Byways Program, the strategic goals do not reflect National Scenic Byways Program objectives.

This suggests the need for a new model for the Minnesota Scenic Byways program that retains the tourism focus but also seeks to add value to transportation, wellness, economic development and recreation initiatives that contribute to community livability. Byways will need to evaluate their interest in this new mission, organize accordingly and engage in partnerships to this end, possibly redefining who they are and what they do.

The role of the Scenic Byway Commission in this new model, in addition to administrative functions relative to the state and national scenic byways programs, would be to promote effective partnerships between byways and agency functional groups and to actively promote effective participation in workshops and conferences that provide networking opportunities and foster potential partnerships.

Much as the Scenic Byways Program has developed since its inception in 1992, the cumulative actions of the byway organizations will define the state program. As before, the partner agencies can contribute guidance, structure and partnering opportunities but the program will be ultimately be defined by the contributions of the byway organizations to their byways and communities.

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