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Intrinsic Resources Management Strategy

Introduction

The goal of the corridor management plan is to provide the proper balance between protecting the Byway's natural, historic, cultural, and recreational resources for future generations while promoting economic development opportunities for the betterment of local government and local businesses. The Minnesota River Valley Scenic Byway has a diversity of historic, natural, recreation, cultural and scenic resources that contribute to its significance. These intrinsic qualities require thoughtful, long-term management strategies. While, generally speaking, the byway is not under great threat from change, there are still a variety of ways in which intrinsic qualities could erode. This chapter defines the potential threats and recommended strategies so that the Byway will maintain its inherent intrinsic quality.

Issues and Challenges

Growth at the Eastern Gateway

The Byway corridor is seeing low growth rates along most of its length. There are two exceptions to this statement: the areas northeast of the byway near Belle Plaine and the suburbanizing areas from Henderson south to Mankato. The byway's eastern gateway is, for all practical purposes, along Route 169 north of Belle Plaine. Although Belle Plaine is not formally part of the



While change is coming slowly to the Valley, there are many sensitive landscapes important to the byway's character that could be lost if careful planning is not encouraged.



The Byway's Resource Management Partners

Local Historic Districts

The locally zoned districts include:

- Ortonville
- New Ulm
- Mankato
- St. Peter
- Ottawa
- Henderson

Municipal and County Zoning

Most communities and counties have some form of zoning and land use regulations. As byway projects proceed, cooperation with these regulatory agencies will be critical.

Big Stone National Wildlife Refuge

The area south of Ortonville has been preserved through a collaborative effort between the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Department of the Interior.

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources manages the following State Parks and Wildlife Management Areas found along the Byway Corridor.

- Big Stone Lake State Park
- Flandrau State Park
- Fort Ridgely State Park and History Center
- Lac qui Parle State Park
- Minneopa State Park
- Upper Sioux Agency State Park

byway, it provides the primary route and entranceway to the byway from the Twin Cities. Suburbanization is spreading south from the metro area and development is increasing along Route 169. The rolling, pastoral landscape is gradually converting to strip commercial development. Efforts should be made to encourage high quality site planning along this corridor so that it complements the byway.

Growth from Henderson to Mankato

New housing development is underway south of the Belle Plaine gateway as well. Construction is occurring along the Byway near Henderson, Le Sueur, Kasota and St. Peter. While additional growth will bring benefits to the corridor, such growth should be managed to enhance, not deteriorate the byway. Again, design standards or concepts should be introduced along the corridor so that there is some agreed upon consistency with how important byway resources are managed during and after the development process. For example, development in long viewsheds should be sited carefully to avoid the total loss the view. In some areas, there may be viewsheds of importance to all residences and construction within these sight lines should be avoided whenever possible. In other cases, the issue for consideration may be access to resources or provisions for future trail development. If a project abuts a regional resource, then accommodations should be made to integrate the project with the future plans for the regional resource.

Gravel Pits and Extraction Activities

Of particular relevance from Henderson to Mankato is the increased amount of gravel and sand extraction occurring within the river valley. The Valley has rich deposits of these materials and property owners should be able to extract these resources if the sites meet environmental and zoning requirements. The issues of relevance to the byway are those of visibility, truck traffic, reclamation and interpretation. Screening should be encouraged if an extraction area will significantly impact a scenic area. Where relevant, guidelines for managing truck traffic, pedestrians and cyclists should be developed during the permitting process. All extraction projects should have enforceable reclamation plans. Finally, in some cases, a site may lend itself to geological interpretation. In such cases, pullout areas should be set aside, visual access guidelines developed and traffic safety plans prepared. In all cases, the overall objective should be ensuring safe co-existence for commercial operations and byway visitors, as well as taking advantage of opportunities to safely interpret interesting commercial activities for the visitor.



Growth along Mankato's Urban Fringe

Mankato is the major urban center along the byway. While the byway, itself, may play a minor overall role in the future development of the city, the Byway Alliance and regional planners should highlight the byway for special treatment as urban growth continues in and around Mankato. Commercial strips west of the city and the byway's basic character are incongruent. Careful placement of signs and careful routing will be important so that visitors do not become disillusioned with the byway.

Growth along New Ulm's Village Edge

New Ulm is the major known tourism destination along the byway. It offers a great historic downtown packaged within an appealing German theme. As development proceeds at the edges of the town, care should be taken to encourage high quality site planning so that there is some echoing of the town's chosen character and theme in all new development.

The Commercial Gateway Challenge

In many areas along the byway -- as in many areas across the country -- commercial development at the outskirts of community centers is detracting from the uniqueness and charm of these rural downtowns. Generally speaking along this byway, this growth is not of the "big box" variety (e.g., Walmarts, Targets, Costco, etc.), but is rather local businesspeople developing smaller franchises or expanding their local businesses on larger lots at the edge of town. In other words, the development is incremental and of relatively small scale. (Development at the outskirts of Mankato tends to be larger and is the exception to this rule.) In addition to new commercial development, consideration should also be given to land uses that may be poorly sited given the byway's objectives of offering a pleasing landscape to the visitor. All land uses are serving a need, but in some cases there may be opportunities to resite or screen uses that are visually inappropriate for the landscape.

The objective for the Alliance should be to encourage higher awareness among local planning commissions of the importance of setting high quality site standards in their commercial areas. Landscaping, lighting, service roads, site-to-site connecting drives, signage and building design can all be shaped without impositions on the property owners with the result being a more cohesive and pleasing entranceway into communities at a reasonable cost to the property owner.

Minnesota State Historical Society Historic Sites

The Minnesota Historic Society has 25 historic sites, including the Lower Sioux Agency Historic Site. Several sites are managed by local historic associations.

Minnesota River Watershed Comprehensive Recreational Guidance Document and Trail Corridor Concept Plan

This plan provides a framework for future trail development in the watershed and will be integral to many byway projects.



Technical Assistance Partners

In addition to the site specific programs, the Byway Corridor benefits from the technical assistance provided by the following organizations:

- *Minnesota State University at Mankato*
- *Minnesota Department of Natural Resources*
- *Minnesota Office of Tourism*
- *Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission*
- *Minnesota River Basin Joint Powers Board*
- *Minnesota Department of Transportation: Office of Environmental Service*
- *University of Minnesota Cooperative Extension*
- *Minnesota Historical Society and State Historic Preservation Office*
- *Minnesota Farm Advocates*
- *Minnesota Planning Office*
- *State Department of Agriculture*
- *Minnesota Pollution Control Agency*
- *Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy*
- *University of Minnesota at Morris Center for Small Towns*

Changes in the Downtowns

Important buildings in several of the downtown areas, including Ortonville and Montevideo, are at risk due to neglect. Other areas such as Redwood Falls and Granite Falls are in somewhat better financial circumstances, but still face high vacancy rates from insufficient demand. The core problem is obviously due to the overall poor economic health of the downtowns, but it is likely that health will one day return to these places and caution is urged if attempts are made to destroy buildings with historic significance and character. The Alliance should not take the role of historic preservation watchdog, but it should take the role of educator. Efforts should be made to make the connections clear between downtowns of uniqueness and character and those that have lost their character due to ill conceived demolitions. The former are most appealing to visitors and new residents, and take longer, if ever, to revive.

Roadway Construction and Improvements

The Minnesota River Valley Scenic Byway is fortunate that it has taken advantage of the state's Natural Preservation Route Program and standards. This state DOT program allows for the more careful management of routes deemed to have significant character and beauty. Roads under this designation are well protected. Of greater concern are highways not covered under the Natural Preservation Route standards and which will be subject to Federal Highway Administration funding improvement standards when modifications to layout and width are made. While in most places, such modifications will be welcome for safety reasons, it is critical to ensure that opportunities are not lost in areas where pullouts should be constructed, trailheads created, new signage erected or sensitive road edge landscapes maintained. For example, one of the issues that has emerged in recent years is the use of the Hydro-Axe roadside vegetation trimming equipment which leaves the vegetation mangled and unsightly for the season. The Alliance is working with MNDOT to decrease the use of this equipment along the byway.

Loss of Farmland and Farms

The Valley supports one of the most productive farming systems in the world, but the global and national pricing markets do not



always make farming particularly economically rewarding. As suburbanization moves outward from the cities and deeper into the Valley, there will be more of an economic incentive for farmers to sell their land, decrease their tilled acres and perhaps close their farms. While the dynamics that determine the future of farming are largely beyond the control of the Alliance, there is nonetheless a role for the Byway in promoting a greater awareness of local agriculture. When possible, the tourism opportunities created by the byway may offer an alternative incentive for some farmers to diversify into tourism rather than residential development. The Alliance should actively work to encourage farmers and farmland owners to consider diversification that keeps land open rather than selling for residential development. Efforts should also be made to work with county planning agencies to encourage farmland development techniques that allow for gradual subdivision without the wholesale loss of vistas and farmscapes.

Lack of Environmental Awareness

The Minnesota River is undergoing a significant revitalization process due to the multiple actions of regional government, local sewer districts, homeowners, farmers, wildlife advocates and environmental cleanup groups. The Byway Alliance can serve an important role by making the *economic-environmental connection* for elected leaders and property owners: environmental health means a higher quality of life and a more viable tourism product.

Loss of Rural Culture

The Alliance should seek ways to encourage and support rural culture whenever possible. Perhaps one of its greatest potential contributions will be strengthening the regional image and identity of the River Valley so that as new people come and as new developments occur, newcomers understand that they are becoming part of a place that has character, significance and qualities that must be managed with care.



Residents and visitors alike will be well served in the long run if the openness and vistas of the Valley can be protected for future generations.



Action Summary

Maintenance and enhancement of the Minnesota River Valley Byway will be accomplished through a variety of means, but in all cases, the Alliance will serve in a facilitative, supportive and promotional role, not a regulatory role. Existing land-use, zoning, preservation, planning and design oversight agencies within the byway's twelve counties will continue to be the regulatory entities in the region. The Alliance's path in the years ahead should be one of helping all residents and elected officials to think regionally and think holistically about the connections between community character, environmental management and economic development.



Many cemeteries along the byway are not protected or particularly well maintained. These are significant rural tourism resources.



Historic structures in some areas are protected; in others they are not.

Action 13: Identify Threatened Resources

On an annual basis, the Alliance should develop a list of critical intrinsic resources that are currently threatened and develop short term strategies to encourage their protection in the most efficient, politically acceptable, and financially feasible manner. Sites may include threatened views, natural areas or historic sites or perhaps the need to make a greater effort to preserve the rural landscape along the Byway. Rural architecture, family farms, the loss of shelterbelts and fence rows, stream vegetation, and grazing livestock are all examples of the elements that comprise the Byway's intrinsic qualities.

For the first year of plan implementation, it is suggested that the Alliance's sensitive resource list include following:

1. Increase regional awareness on the importance of gateways. This includes gateways to the byway (e.g., north of Belle Plaine) and community gateways (e.g., developing commercial areas at the edges of town centers.) The Alliance might support a series of workshops on gateway planning and design emphasizing the connection between the appearance of a place and its success as a tourism destination.
2. Identify a short list of areas along the river that need restoration and/or investment. Partner with organizations already seeking to enhance the river; attempt to acquire funding to assist with projects that benefit both the byway and the river.



Action 14: Recognize Well-Managed Change

The Alliance should institute an annual **Byway Management Awards Program**. As noted in Chapter Two, Action Eight, an annual conference (e.g., the Minnesota Byway Roundup) should be held to promote the byway's accomplishments and future objectives. Awards should be given for good stewardship efforts along the byway. (Awards could also be given for good tourism development efforts, but for the purposes of this Action's discussion, the focus is on resource stewardship.) At the same time at which good stewardship is recognized, a less overt message could be sent concerning areas that are threatened and toward which more attention is needed. Any discussion of positive efforts offers an opportunity for discussions of topics where more work is needed.

Create a Byway Management Awards Program

Underlying this recommendation is an important point on the way that the Alliance should generally position itself regarding growth. In order for the Alliance to maintain multi-entity/cross-issue partnerships, it must not be perceived as "pro-growth" or "anti-growth". The Alliance must instead consistently encourage "quality growth." It should be seen as a rationale and practical organization that works for a middle ground approach on issues. There are plenty of more assertively pro-growth and anti-growth organizations out there. There are fewer "quality growth" entities.

Action 15: Encourage the Adoption of Design Guidelines for New Development within the Corridor

Whether it be residential, commercial, downtown or resource extraction development, each of these types of projects can often be integrated within the landscape in either a sensitive manner or a poorly planned manner. The former can enhance and support the byway; the latter may deteriorate the byway experience. The Alliance should work with regional and local planning organizations to encourage the adoption of **Site Planning Guidelines for the Scenic Byway Corridor**. These non-regulatory guidelines should help property owners and review agencies think broadly about the potential impacts that new development may bring to the byway as well as the overall character of the affected community.

Design guidelines need not be regulatory, but instead can be advisory.



Work with MNDOT on road improvement principles and specifics for the byway.

Action 16: Encourage Well-Planned Roadway Modifications

The Alliance should encourage the integration of this plan’s ideas into future road improvement plans at the state and county levels. When state or county officials begin to think about roadway improvements, they should immediately turn to the Alliance for input on the types of investments needed to move the byway plan forward. In cases where improvements may be in areas of delicate road-edge landscapes, Alliance members and local community representatives should work with highway departments to find creative design solutions that ensure safety without needless damage to landscape integrity.

Build a strong partnership with local farmers and integrate agriculture into byway actions and investments.

Action 17: Support Local Agriculture

The Alliance should continue to find ways to advocate and interpret local agriculture for if farming stays strong, then the landscape will have a better chance of maintaining its rural character. As farming becomes less profitable, farmers will sell their land for housing developments. As the landscape shifts away from farming, the local culture will also shift away from farming. If that transition occurs to a great degree, then an important intrinsic quality of the Byway will erode.

One of the Valley’s strengths is that it is home to a range of types of farming and farming practices and each of these merit interpretation and promotion. Some travelers will be most interested in historic farming practices, other visitors will be interested in “modern” methods, while others will be drawn to the “alternative” farms. The Byway’s *Food for a Nation* theme should encourage visitors and Minnesotans to support local agriculture through education, retail purchases and pro-farming political lobbying.

Support and lead toward more investment in recreational facilities.

Action 18: Develop and Invest in Regional Recreation Amenities such a Regional Trail System

Communities along the Byway should continue to advocate for and develop recreational facilities and opportunities, including a trail network along the Minnesota River in accordance with the Minnesota River Watershed Comprehensive Recreational Guidance Document and Trail Corridor Concept Plan. Communities should advocate for resources at the local and state level to improve recreational opportunities along the riverway, including the linking of a river-long trail from community to community.



Action 19: Coordinate with Environmental Management Programs

There are a number of environmental initiatives currently in operation along the Byway Corridor addressing issues of water quality, wildlife maintenance and prairie and wetland conservation. The Alliance should work to coordinate Byway efforts with these organizations, solicit their advice, and develop mutually beneficial partnerships. A good way to approach this is through the establishment of an annual *Agenda for Action* in which the projects that will foster partnerships are highlighted. Awards could be given for good partnership efforts. Coordination will also be critical during fundraising; the Alliance acting as a facilitator of joint funding requests will naturally foster partnerships.

Build partnerships with environmental advocacy efforts and programs.

An appropriate issue for the Alliance to actively support may be the Northern Tallgrass Prairie Initiative. This is both a threatened resource and one in which the traveling public will have an interest. The Northern Tallgrass Prairie National Wildlife Refuge is one of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services's highest ranking projects in the upper midwest. The Service feels it is critical to protect the few remaining vestiges of native tallgrass prairie. Today, less than 1% of Minnesota's original native tallgrass prairie remains. The Alliance should consider acting in partnership with Fish and Wildlife to promote the tallgrass prairie through the Alliance's marketing efforts.

Action 20: Support a Healthy Valley Rural Culture by Promoting Local Cultural Organizations and Events

Native American and European cultures are central to the Byway's character and interpretive story. These intrinsic qualities need support and enhancement in order for Minnesotans and others to appreciate the complex story of how these two cultures have interacted over time. Cultural organizations (e.g., ethnic groups, civic groups, historical societies, the Grange, etc.) in small communities depend largely on the interest and involvement of a few dedicated individuals; there is little the Alliance can do to find and motivate these people. What the Alliance can do is draw attention to the events and fundraisers organized by local groups and look for cooperative projects that can support local cultural vitality.

Encourage a vital rural culture through byway and tourism activities and events.



