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# An Overview of *RiverStories*

## A Corridor Management Plan and Regional Tourism Investment and Marketing Program for the Minnesota River Valley Scenic Byway

The Minnesota River Valley is a place of significant beauty, history and character and it has the very great potential to become an American Byway (formerly called National Scenic Byways). As such, the Valley can be one of a select number of driving and travel experiences in the United States representing authenticity and a connection to place. Byways offer the visitor an experience that meshes the past with the present, and the natural with the human-made. The Minnesota River Valley Scenic Byway is a perfect example of that integration.

*The Minnesota River Valley has great potential to become one of the most successful American Byways in the country.*

This corridor management plan is designed to convey the Valley's potential and thus assist with attaining national byway designation through the Federal Highway Administration. The plan is also, however, a rural tourism strategy to guide investments, marketing and interpretive development along the corridor. It defines the most important steps needed to protect the byway's character and resources. It also recommends how to manage tourism in a way that balances economic gain with the protection of community character. The ultimate objective of this plan is to strengthen Minnesota River Valley communities through both economic means (i.e., more visitors and tourism) and through a closer connection to the river and the Valley's exceptional history (i.e., through investments in recreational facilities, resource protection and interpretive programs.)

*The RiverStories is a byway plan, but it is also an integrated rural tourism development and resource management strategy.*

In the end, it is hoped that this plan will not only bring thousands of out-of-state visitors to our Valley, but also make residents of Minnesota more aware of this special part of the state. That awareness will naturally translate into more political support to solve the challenges we face as well as closer economic ties to the urban economies of Minnesota. If we reach those objectives, the river and our local rural economies will all be healthier and more sustainable.



## Where is the Corridor?

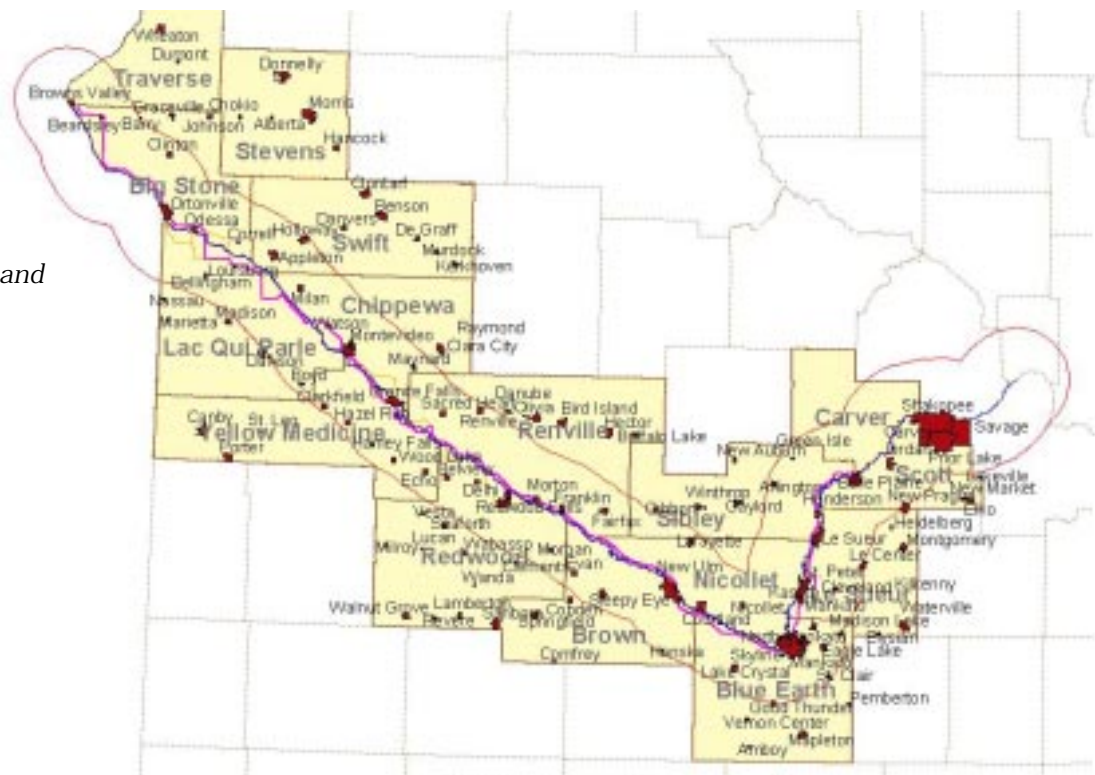
The Minnesota River Valley Scenic Byway was designated in 1995 and then extended in 1996 to form the current 287 mile route. The identified corridor encompasses 10 miles on each side of the river. The byway stretches from Browns Valley in the west through the communities of Ortonville, Montevideo, Granite Falls, Redwood Falls, New Ulm and into Mankato. From there, the route moves north through St. Peter, Le Sueur, Henderson and it ends near Belle Plaine.

## Why Prepare a Plan?

First, a corridor management plan is needed to achieve our most immediate goal: designation as a National Scenic Byway. The Alliance almost reached that goal this year; the Federal Highway Administration requested that our full corridor management plan be prepared before designation would be offered. Once we have our designation, then we will be eligible to receive more assured federal funding to implement our plan.

Second, investing in tourism will grow the health of our local economies and the Valley as a whole. In 2000, tourism brought \$10 billion to the state of Minnesota's economy. As such, it ranked as the state's 5th largest industry. In 1999, the Office of Tourism estimates tourism expenditures in Southwestern

*The Byway corridor and the participating counties.*



Minnesota at \$334 million per year. Despite the large size of this figure, it represents just 4.2% of tourism expenditures in the state as a whole. This region could be capturing a much larger piece of that state-wide economic pie.

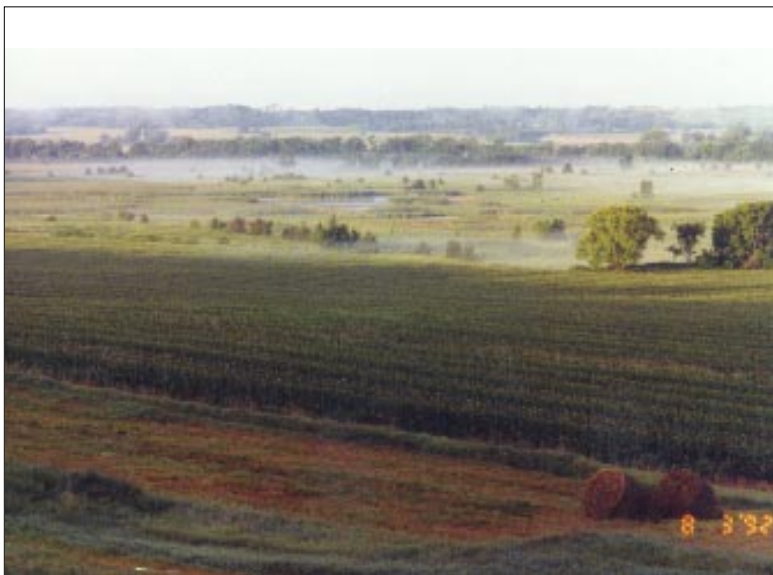
Last year, the Prairie Waters Tourism Coalition (Swift, Big Stone, Chippewa, Lac qui Parle, and Yellow Medicine counties) sponsored a study to examine the return on investment from the coalition's advertising. That study found a 28-to-1 return on every dollar invested by local government. In other words, tourism represents one of the most immediate ways that local government can strengthen a local economy.

This strategy is also designed with the idea that tourism can and should mesh with other community development and economic development activities. Tourism promotion helps in the general effort to make potential business investors more aware of an area. Second home and retiree investors are increasingly being seen as major economic contributors in their own right. Nationally, one third of the income flowing to households is non-employment income, the majority of which is retirement savings and earnings. In his book *Lost Landscapes and Failed Economies*, economist Thomas Michael Power estimates that that every household who retires to an area generates 1.32 local jobs (Island Press, 1996.). Often, the investments made to increase the appeal of an area to tourists improve the quality of life for existing and prospective new residents. Trails, river launching points, and downtown beautification all help to strengthen an area's overall economy.

\$4342  
in Prairie  
Waters's  
advertising

Each dollar  
invested by  
Prairie  
Waters grew  
28 times to  
create ...

\$121,000  
in local  
spending



Fields, the river and space

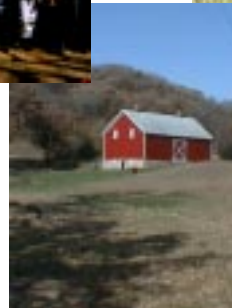


## Goals of the Plan

This corridor management plan is a community-based economic development strategy designed to balance preservation and promotion in a manner that maintains the integrity and value of the Byway's intrinsic resources and values.

The goals for this strategy are the following:

1. Balance economic promotion and character protection throughout the corridor and in alignment with the desires of local communities.
2. Strengthen the municipal finances of our communities through growing property values and more business development.
3. Support existing businesses and encourage new businesses that are complementary to the area.
4. Work to protect and improve the environmental health of the River and its Valley.
5. Market our region more assertively so that people in and out of the state know of the Valley as a good place to live, retire to, visit, operate a business, and run a farm.
6. Develop interpretive strategies that benefit the traveler and increase our residents' understanding of local history and culture.
7. Improve the recreational facilities and amenities of the Valley.
8. Assure safe travel along the Byway route for the visiting public.
9. Encourage community participation throughout the planning and implementation of this strategy.
10. Attain American Byway Designation to help achieve the above goals.



The byway will seek a balance between economic gain, managing our landscapes and protecting the environment.



# The RiverStories Initiative

This plan is not a regulation or a law, it is a blueprint. It is a flexible guidance document. Just as any architect lays out a plan before the builder picks up a hammer, this corridor management plan provides the structure and direction for the development of this byway. After the plan, communities, elected officials and private businessowners will “pick up the hammers” of the eight-point implementation initiative called *RiverStories*.

**1. Organizational Program:** The Alliance will work in partnership with a wide range of organizations and individuals to implement this plan.

*Getting and staying organized*

**2. Resource Management:** A foundation of the program is good environmental stewardship.

*Protecting our resources*

**3. National Marketing Program:** The region should pursue a program to bring in multiple press tours. This comprehensive effort will gain coverage for the Valley in over 100 national and regional publications each year.

*Marketing*

**4. Tourism Product Development:** The program recommends a wide range of ways that new experiences and tourism products can be developed by communities and individuals.

*Product Development*

**5. RiverStories Interpretive Program:** This will be a Valley-long interpretive and community development project to construct kiosks and interpretive signage relating to the Valley’s natural history, the area’s history and role in traditional and alternative agriculture, and the history and struggles relating to people dwelling in the Valley.

*Interpretation and Education*

**6. Valley Ventures Fund:** Tourism businesses often have difficulty meeting the requirements of most loan programs. The region should create a revolving loan fund specifically designed for tourism businesses in order to encourage investment in the Valley.

*Business Development*

**7. Transportation Improvements:** Federal and state highway funds should be sought to fund resurfacing, signage and pullout investments for key sections of the Minnesota River Valley Scenic Byway. Other efforts could seek funding for alternative transportation projects in the Valley such as rail or cycling.

*Transportation*

**8. Recreation Investments:** The final leg of the strategy will expand the Valley’s network of walking, biking, horsebacking and snowmobiling trails. These funds will also improve access to the river and support efforts such as the River Valley birding trail.

*Recreation*



# Building the Tourism Experience Around the River's Story

A critical element of this effort will be the interpretive and tourism development themes. The **RiverStories Program** will weave together three primary themes into a system of trails, interpretive and educational sites, and new tourism businesses.

## Historical Theme: Struggles for a Home



The Minnesota River Valley has a national story to tell about the struggles for a home by the Euro-American immigrants and the Dakota people. Within the Valley, the stories of Native American life, treaties and resistance mesh with the stories of European immigrant struggles, the U.S. government's conflict with the Sioux, the concept of Manifest Density and the creation of one of the most productive agricultural areas in the world.

## Cultural Theme: Food for a Nation



The Minnesota River Valley has a regional, national and international story to tell of the growth and development of the American system of agriculture: *Taking Food to a Nation*. Telling the story of the region's innovations (e.g., ag coops and Green Giant), its productivity and its farming systems will help all visitors to better appreciate the importance of agriculture to this nation.

## Natural Theme: The River's Legacy



From the Minnesota River's beginnings in the plains to its entry into the Mississippi River, the river and its valley tell interesting tales of the ancient history and rich ecological diversity of the Upper Midwest. This is an important story to tell as it is part of the overall effort to restore the Minnesota River and make all Minnesotans more aware of this river's role in the natural and cultural evolution of the state.

When put together, these will be a powerful educational forces for protecting the character of our Valley and improving the health of our communities.





# Our Vision

The Minnesota River Valley has a concentration of historic, cultural and natural resources that can make the byway a major destination within Minnesota and one of the highlighted roads of the American Byways Program.

National byway designation will leverage international and national marketing for the byways program. This will have major benefits for the Minnesota River Valley Byway as byways are seen as a distinctive type of travel experience and brand. The Alliance will seek funding to pursue its own national and in-state marketing program to promote the Byway and the communities of southwestern Minnesota. These efforts will generate not only tourists, but also more prospective new businesses and retirees -- both of whom can strengthen our rural economies.

Visitors will enjoy a tremendous range of outdoor recreation opportunities. The Alliance will find funding to build more trails and others types of recreational facilities. Similar to our hunting and fishing visitors, bicycling, canoeing and bird-watching enthusiasts will make the Byway an annual destination as more and more sites, trails and events will be developed to host these groups. The charm of small towns and hospitality of residents along the Byway will allow visitors to find both exceptional outdoor recreation and enjoy a slice of *real* America.

All of this work will provide more consumers and more opportunities for our existing businesses and for entrepreneurs wanting to invest in the Valley. A new tourism-oriented loan program will provide the targeted capital to make the Valley a competitive place to start and grow a tourism business.

At the foundation of this effort will be a philosophy of seeking a balance between economic improvement and environmental protection. Since the reason why people will come to this place is the rural and natural character of the Valley, we must work hard to protect those resources. Tourism must complement our rural and farming character, not try to overwhelm or replace it.

In summary, it is our vision that this effort to balance promotion with protection will create stronger local economies, stronger municipal tax bases, and a greater awareness of the region within the state and the nation. Together, these results will not only improve tourism, but produce positive benefits in overall community health as we invest in our counties and towns, and as the region's image and positive qualities are known by more people.



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Appleton MN 56208

*RiverStories:*  
*A Corridor Management Plan for the  
Minnesota River Valley Scenic Byway*

