Minnesota River Valley National Scenic Byway
Request for Proposals (RFP)

The purpose of this RFP is to identify and establish a contract with a website developer to update the existing website at www.mnrivervalley.com.

Project title: Byway Website Update 2024

Proposal deadline: February 15, 2024

Notification of Vendor Selection: April 1, 2024

Project period: July 1, 2024 – December 31, 2024
This project is dependent on grant funding. Two different grant opportunities will be pursued, and both would start July 1, 2024.

Proposals should be addressed to:
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Communications Manager
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This RFP is issued by the Minnesota River Valley National Scenic Byway Alliance (herein after referred to as the Byway Alliance) on behalf of the Minnesota River Valley National Scenic Byway (herein referred to as the Byway)

Proposal Evaluation
The proposals will be ranked based on the following factors:

1. Qualifications and experience of Responder (25%)
2. Value and cost of the proposal (25%)
3. Ongoing support of the Responder (25%)
4. References and examples of the Responder (25%)

The Byway Alliance will review proposals and make a final recommendation. The Byway Alliance reserves the right to reject or accept any and all bids.

Proposal content

The proposal prepared in response to this RFP shall contain the following information:

1. Name, address and contact information
2. Qualifications and experience:
   a. Name of the person(s) in charge of the project
   b. Familiarity with destination management organizations, and/or scenic byways
   c. Samples of similar work
3. The scope of services
   a. The process and timeline
   b. Platforms/widgets used
      i. Wordpress (requirement)
      ii. Mapping system – currently use MapifyPro (open to other options)
      iii. Ability to pull information from Explore MN Tourism website (requirement)
   c. Items included such as training, follow up, etc.
4. The cost estimate including the following:
   a. A firm, not to exceed price for the complete scope of services.
   b. Separate quotes for optional add-ons
      i. Custom Itineraries with sign-in (example)
      ii. ADA
      iii. Other items as suggested by your organization.
   c. Rates that will be applied to the calculations of additional work if such work is authorized. Include hourly rates.
   d. Fees for ongoing work and maintenance in the future
   e. Hosting Fees

Background

The **Mission** of the Minnesota River Valley Scenic Byway Alliance is:

To cooperatively enhance the Minnesota River Valley as a travel destination and raise awareness of its nationally important stories to provide economic benefits and preserve the intrinsic qualities of the byway.

The Byway, federally designated since 2002, plays an important role in linking and promoting historical sites and stories to better tell the history of the Minnesota River Valley through a variety of efforts, including its programs, website, roadside signs, calendar, brochures, and other marketing materials.

Some important notes:
- The byway does not have a fully funded staff or organization.
- Funding for the byway is primarily grant based: MnDOT, Explore MN Tourism and the Minnesota Historical Society are the main opportunities for funding.

- The website needs to function as a staff person, used by a collaboration of chambers and interested parties, and needs to work with minimal oversight for the next 5-10 years.
- The Byway is coordinated by staff from the Upper MN Valley Regional Development Commission (UMVRDC). UMVRDC staff manage the website and need to be able to update content fully.
- The Byway highway sign (pink with the eagle) does not change.

Our product

Our byway is a 300-mile route along the Minnesota River. We have identified over 150 discovery sites that we want visitors to know about when they visit. There are 20 towns and two tribal nations directly on the byway route. The byway corridor is defined as ten miles on both sides of the Minnesota River from Browns valley to Belle Plaine. There are an additional 40 towns in the byway corridor.

What do people need from the Byway?

Help in learning about the history and discovery sites along the river.
Help to navigate and plan a trip along the Minnesota River.

What makes us special?

The US - Dakota War of 1862 story in the Minnesota River Valley.
The scenery and geology of the Minnesota River.

Project Scope

The purpose of the update is to modernize the website, utilize current technology and create a new way of viewing the discovery sites.

The scope of services should include:

- Strategy and Research
- Development
- Project Management
- Training

The updated website should consider all information in this RFP.

The website is the property of the Byway Alliance.

Current website: www.mnrivervalley.com

The current byway website was created in 2014 by Vivid Image. It is a Wordpress site utilizing MapifyPro.

Our website, which was built using a specific programming language (PHP), will not function correctly after the end of 2024. This is due to the impending end-of-life of that specific version of PHP. Our website will not function after that date due to significant functionality issues and security vulnerabilities.

Our latest google analytics shows the following:
- The engagement rate is 60.88%, considered "average," with room for improvement.
- The home page receives the most sessions, closely followed by Destinations Along the Byway.
- The majority of sessions come from mobile users – 62%
- Organic Search traffic is the primary source of sessions.

What we like and want to keep

Design. We like the design and look and feel. We love the colors and branding currently being used, as well as the look at feel of the current website.

Images. Most images on the website are from 2022 and while we may get some new images, we can use what we have.

Map. The map on our website was recently updated and includes the byway routes and legend the way we want it. The filters may change as we analyze that part of our content. How it functions may need to change with a new website.

Content. Our content is robust. Discovery sites are, for the most part, pretty static, but should be able to be updated as needed.

We may cut some of what is not needed or not used and look at the filters to see what changes to make. We do not plan on creating any new content for the website, but the website should be designed so staff can make any content, photos, and mapping changes internally if need be.

Some of our content is unique and recently created/updated.
- Dakota History: https://www.mnrivervalley.com/dakota-homeland-story/
- Dakota content on all discovery sites. We had Dakota consultants rewrite most of our content on each of the discovery sites.
- Printable maps: https://www.mnrivervalley.com/maps-of-the-byway/
  - These maps were recently completed. They are in the Visitors Guide.
- Itineraries: https://www.mnrivervalley.com/itineraries/
  - These itineraries were recently completed. They are in the Visitors Guide.

Videos. Our videos were done in 2016 but have aged well.
https://www.mnrivervalley.com/stories/videos/

Visitors Guide. The Visitors Guide was last created in 2022 and has a lot of great content.
https://www.mnrivervalley.com/publications/

EMT widgets.
https://www.mnrivervalley.com/things-to-do/places-to-stay/
https://www.mnrivervalley.com/events-along-the-byway/
We utilize the Explore MN Tourism website for places to stay and events. We would like to continue this and utilize even more if possible.

Home page. We like our home page. The design and look can stay the same. Can keep most of what is there now, with some simplification. Two suggestion:
- Dakota history could be more prominent.
- An idea could be to add a video from our existing videos.

What we want to change

Technical updates. Any technical changes that our website needs to be mobile friendly and address mapping issues.

Discovery sites. https://www.mnrivervalley.com/things-to-do/sites-along-the-byway/
There are 97 discovery sites. It is difficult to see the discovery sites on our website. They are buried within the map and there is a lot of clicking to get to the information. The discovery sites are really important and should be easier to browse through and to get to.

An example of what we would like:
https://www.atlasobscura.com/things-to-do/colorado/places?page=6
- Love the ability to look at the sites and add to favorites to view later.
- Love that the user can look at the attractions and then see where they are on the map.
- Love how you can pin/flag locations and make your own itinerary.

Some additional issues with our current discovery sites:
- "Location Information" on each discovery site – needs to be easier to view and not have to click again.
- Search function does not work to get to discovery sites.
- Want to be able to search for a discovery site and then see what else is nearby.
- We have a filter on the map for discovery sites but the topic areas are misleading. The filter on map doesn't really say what is available along the byway, it only shows the discovery sites. For example, golf courses – it is only the discovery sites that have golf courses, not all golf courses in the MN River Valley. Need to rethink that.

Itineraries. We have some itineraries on our website but we would love for people to create their own itineraries and add discovery sites to their own list. We would need a sign-in function for this.

Information outlets and membership.
https://www.mnrivervalley.com/about/information-outlets/
https://www.mnrivervalley.com/cities-along-the-byway/
https://www.mnrivervalley.com/our-members/
Our informational outlets and members could be easier to navigate and showcase. They are currently buried. It needs to remain easy to update.

What does our website need to do?

Our website currently does all of what we need it to do. Below is a list. Some things our website does well and some things it does not do well. It is assumed that most things on our current website will stay.

Primary actions on our website

1. Read about discovery sites.
2. Navigate and understand the map.

Secondary actions on our website

1. View and/or request the Visitors Guide.
2. Make their own itinerary/add to list. *– addition to current website*
3. Understand why they should drive our byway.
4. Get information from city/chamber websites and Explore MN Tourism.
5. Get information about history. We have some amazing Dakota history and Dakota place name mapping to showcase.
6. Add their stories/crowd sourcing/review input on discovery sites - *outdated.*
7. Be able to search for information.
8. Become a member.
9. Review byway documents (comprehensive plan, etc)

Needs for Byway Alliance Staff

- Be easy for staff to update.
- Website will work well with low staffing capacity.
- Utilize databases to import and export information to the website for when we do major updates to the content.
- Fulfill information requests.
- Take online byway memberships.
- Have a place for new items as they come up.
- Use Google Analytics for usage tracking.
- Continue to be owned and managed by the Byway Alliance.