

St. Croix County Comprehensive Bike & Pedestrian Plan

Narrative Response/Attachment 1

St. Croix County submits this non-infrastructure, **Bicycle and Pedestrian Planning Project Application**, for funding for the development of a county-wide comprehensive bicycle and pedestrian plan. This project has been identified within numerous local plans including the County's Comprehensive Plan. The sense of urgency is upon us. Never is there a more crucial time for the plan to be created and implemented than during the current construction of the \$650 million St. Croix River Crossing Bridge Project. The St. Croix River Crossing will provide a safer, more reliable river crossing that includes a four-lane river bridge, new roadway approaches on both sides of the river, historic and environmental mitigation, and the conversion of the existing Historical Stillwater Lift Bridge to a bike and pedestrian facility, also known as the *Loop Trail*. One solid consistent county-wide comprehensive bike and pedestrian plan is necessary to provide alternative options to automotive travel, increased economic and tourism opportunities, as well as healthy recreational opportunities. Failure to plan for bicycle and pedestrian travel now may reduce the County's ability to promote biking and walking as viable alternative modes of transportation for the future.

Existing Bicycle Planning and Facilities: St. Croix County needs a comprehensive plan and vision in order to cohesively combine the recreational elements of the St. Croix County Parks and Recreation Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan as well as the long-range transportation element of St. Croix County's Highway Department Bicycle Transportation Plan 1995-2015. As highlighted in the pre-scoping application, several municipalities within St. Croix County have developed bicycle plans or have adopted plans that reference bicycle planning in some capacity. The presence of these existing plans creates a large number of proposed facilities in a scattered and disconnected manner. A single plan creating a countywide multi-modal transportation network will synthesizing local plans, and contain specific recommendations to increase infrastructure in systematic method with an eye toward regional integration and connectivity to the Loop Trail and Interstate 94 Bridge.

The immense enthusiasm, potential, existing tools, and urgency surrounding this project has led to a widely-attended, citizen created, grassroots organization known as the St. Croix Bike and Pedestrian Trail Coalition. The Coalition is dedicated to creating a coordinated bike and pedestrian trail network in St. Croix County. The Coalition's mission is: *To support local governmental entities in the development of a multi-use pedestrian/bike trail system and road accommodations network across St. Croix County that connects to the St. Croix River Crossing Loop Trail, creates safe recreational opportunities, supports healthy life styles, supports development of*

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safe commuting, and promotes tourism and commerce in the greater St. Croix County area. This Coalition contains the bones for a plan steering committee aimed at developing a safe, accessible bicycle network throughout the county, while also creating links to existing and planned bicycle facilities in adjacent counties in Wisconsin and Minnesota that extend the states multi-modal transportation network. The plan will forecast new or replacement trips, new or replacement utilitarian trips, and identify the location and length of possible infrastructure corridors. The plan will also prioritize and detail education, encouragement, enforcement, evaluation, and engineering projects to promote and increase bicycling as a viable alternative mode of transportation within St. Croix County and the region.

Connectivity: The trails being constructed as a part of the St. Croix River Crossing Project provide a once in a generation impetus for northwestern Wisconsin to improve both its recreational and transportation trail facilities in the entire St. Croix River Valley basin. The *Loop Trail's* location on the St. Croix River bluffs in St. Croix County makes St. Croix County's government, and particularly its Community Development Department, uniquely qualified to bring together local, county, state and federal governmental organizations along with various bicycle and service organizations to produce a well thought out, carefully detailed plan that will serve as the guide for future trail expansion over the next 15 years.

In this planning process, there are several areas close to the Loop Trail that are of particular interest. First, a trail connection between the Historic Stillwater Lift Bridge and the Interstate 94 Bridge in Hudson has been a desire of local planners for a number of decades. The *Loop Trail* provides a safe, user friendly path across the Lift Bridge into Wisconsin and then generally parallels the new State Highway 64 as it moves south and crosses back into Minnesota. This Wisconsin portion of the *Loop Trail* provides an excellent northern phase for the connection to the I-94 Bridge and its trail accommodation. Then, the City of Hudson has an already existing trail system through its Lake Front Park to the I-94 Bridge. While the Hudson trail accommodations may need some upgrading, they provide a solid southern phase of the connection between the two iconic bridges. Joining the northern and southern phases between the two bridges then becomes one of the significant areas for discussion as this plan is created.

A second important connection in close proximity to the *Loop Trail* is Willow River State Park. Containing almost 3000 acres of prairie oak savannah, forests and expansive river way scenery, this park will be a welcome destination for trail users to enjoy the

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variety of recreational opportunities available in the park. In addition, there are discussions underway to increase the trail facilities within the park over the next several years to provide more biking opportunities for park visitors.

A third important connection corridor that has been considered for a number of years is the connection between the City of Hudson and the City of New Richmond, the county's two largest cities. The corridor generally meanders along an abandoned railroad bed as circumstances will permit and comes within close proximity to Willow River State Park.

While the momentum for trails is primarily centered within the areas of the county closest to the *Loop Trail*, the plan will be county-wide encompassing communities in the entire county and considering connections to trails, both existing and future, in the bordering counties of Pierce, Polk and Dunn to extend the state multi-modal transportation network. Other desirable possibilities for links to county amenities include connecting to the City of River Falls, a bike friendly community; to Kinnickinnic State Park in Pierce County; to the St. Croix County Parks – Homestead, Glen Hills and Troy Beach; to a trail that will eventually come from Interstate Park in Polk County; and other equally as attractive and important connections.

Timeline, Safety, and Miscellaneous: St. Croix County Community Development will be selecting and working with a qualified consultant. Preparation of the plan will commence at the beginning of Fiscal Year 15 and completion for the plan will take approximately one year, with a completion date on or near the beginning of Fiscal Year 16. The plan will identify how to blend and mimic safety provisions as highlighted in the existing tool/document relating to the Loop Trail Plan. (See <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/metro/projects/stcroix/pdfs/visqman/Chapter%207.pdf>.) Comparatively speaking, many requests for non-infrastructure, planning grants for Bicycling and Pedestrian projects may not contain the sense of urgency like St. Croix County's situation. The rarity of this interstate bike connection along and across the federally designated Lower St. Croix River is a key component to this projects success. Additionally, both WisDNR and WisDOT have stated that a comprehensive plan of this nature is necessary in order to hold land for trails on road construction projects or purchase land for trails if available on the open market. Without a comprehensive bicycle and pedestrian plan in place these viable alternative transportation options for facilities and infrastructure are non-existent.