

Grand Marais reconstruction project



Award category

General Project Award

Organization name

Minnesota Department of Transportation

Nominee's name

City of Grand Marais
Sawtooth Mountain Clinic

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References

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3 publications to be notified

- Duluth News Tribune (print)
- WTIP (radio)
- Cook County News (print)

IAP2 members

Minnesota Department of Transportation

Title	Grand Marais reconstruction project
Organizing Group	Minnesota Department of Transportation
Location	Grand Marais, MN
Key Question/Problem	How do we get the public involved early to deliver a positive project for everyone involved?
Sample Methods	Sawtooth Mountain Clinic hosted a visioning initiative prior to the Minnesota Department of Transportation's reconstruction project and received input from the community. MnDOT worked closely with the City of Grand Marais and many other interested organizations within the community by hosting multiple stakeholder and public meetings. Other engagement was done through social media, in-person and virtual meetings, email lists, project website, door-to-door visits, flyers, animation videos, media interviews and more to engage the public and keep them informed throughout the project.
Results	MnDOT was able to deliver a once-in-a-generation construction project that included improvements to the roadway, sidewalks, aesthetics, bicycle trail connections, pedestrian crossings, ADA connections and more.
Impact Level	This project highly impacted the community of Grand Marais and their visitors.
Time Frame	Visioning, planning, design: 2014-20, Construction: 2021-22
People Engaged	Community of Grand Marais, stakeholders, governmental agencies, tourists, general public.
Web Link	https://www.dot.state.mn.us/d1/projects/hwy-61-grand-marais/index.html

THE PROBLEM AND CHALLENGE

The Highway 61 corridor along the North Shore of Lake Superior is the lifeblood of the communities it serves, stretching 150 miles from Duluth, Minn., to the Canadian border. It provides the only regional access for goods and services for much of the area and is a safe, efficient route for the tourism-based economy. The community of Grand Marais identified the highway corridor as both a vital connection and a top barrier to physical activity and community connections within the city.

Deteriorating pavement along the corridor prompted the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) to schedule a construction project through the community in 2021-22. MnDOT work closely with the Grand Marais community to identify goals for pedestrian mobility improvements, reduced traffic speeds, improving roadside features and improved drainage. In addition to work done in Grand Marais, the construction project stretched 12.2 miles along Highway 61 and included two box culvert replacements. The project included lane closures, temporary traffic signals and detours.

MnDOT partnered with the Sawtooth Mountain Clinic, City of Grand Marais and other key partners to create a Highway 61 Steering Committee and assist in the development of the project design. Some challenges were met early on with differing views on how the corridor vision would be implemented through the design, but through honest discussions about feasibility, the partners were able to move forward. The reconstruction included narrowing the roadway, adding bicycle and pedestrian facilities on both sides of the roadway and creating an environment where highway traffic would slow down, resulting in safer roadway crossings for non-motorized users.

This project also spanned the COVID-19 pandemic, which presented unique, unprecedented challenges in both the performance of work and in communication with the public.

There was much fuss when valued trees needed removal. I'm glad to report that at recent meetings of the city Park and Rec Board, our members can actually recite the numbers and diverse varieties of new trees and bushes planted to replace necessary removals. ~ Bob Nesheim, Grand Marais resident/Active Living steering committee/City Park and Rec board/Gitchi Gami State Trail board

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

In 2011, prior to MnDOT's involvement, the Sawtooth Mountain Clinic hosted an Active Living Summit in Grand Marais. One of the themes identified through the workshop was safety and accessibility along the Highway 61 corridor through Grand Marais, especially for people walking and bicycling.

In 2014-15, the Clinic was chosen to receive funding from the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota through the Active Living for All initiative. This enabled the clinic to work with the City of Grand Marais, community members and other key stakeholders to host a community visioning process to create the initial vision for the Highway 61 corridor, serving a diverse community for generations to come.

MnDOT actively participated in this community-led process and provided vital feedback through the process, which also included a Health Impact Assessment. MnDOT worked closely with those who developed the community vision to gain support for the project. City staff and elected officials also took a very active role in gaining community support for the project, including working with business owners and citizens to explain the project impacts and benefits.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION METHODS

MnDOT understood the apprehension community members felt when it came to disrupting their main street for two construction seasons. Not only did the state want the project to go as smoothly as possible, we wanted the

community to be proud of and take ownership in the end result.

There were multiple stakeholder meetings and public open houses to discuss the upcoming construction project and gather community input. The DOT held a Complete Streets and Flexibility in Design workshop, were interviewed on the local radio station throughout project development and construction and held traffic staging and traffic control discussions with community members and business owners. MnDOT met with Grand Marais City Council and Cook County representatives regarding detours, costs and project concepts throughout the process.

MnDOT staff walked the business corridor prior to construction, dropping off flyers with more information, asking about any concerns and inviting owners to a public meeting. The state also used social media, local media and a [project website](#) to keep the community updated on the project status, detours, meetings and other pertinent information.

Outside of what the state could provide in terms of advertising/marketing materials, a committee including Visit Cook County, the Cook County Chamber of Commerce, and other stakeholders created an extensive campaign to make sure visitors to the community were aware of the project and had the knowledge necessary to visit and enjoy the local attractions during the construction period.

Throughout the project, MnDOT and the City maintained a dialog to ensure design decisions met these goals. MnDOT's willingness to work with the City resulted in a once-in-a-generation project that met all of the community's goals. ~ Mike Roth, City of Grand Marais City Administrator

UNIQUENESS OF THE PROJECT

What was the decision statement and how were the public involved in framing the statement?

The biggest decision statement, with most MnDOT urban projects, is how to get the public involved early to deliver a positive project for everyone. With the community visioning process and documentation already in place thanks to the Sawtooth Mountain Clinic initiative, MnDOT was able to begin the planning and design process already knowing the community's desires.

In what way(s) did public participation improve the decision?

In partnership with the City of Grand Marais, community members, and other key stakeholders, the Sawtooth Mountain Clinic led a community visioning process to create a vision for the future of the highway corridor, to better serve the community for generations to come. By then using the results of that visioning process and engaging the public from the start, MnDOT was able to learn the most important needs and concerns of the Grand Marais community and incorporate them into the future construction project. It was important for the state to make sure the public knew they were involved in and being heard throughout the entire process of the project.

How did public participation contribute to the resolution of the problem?

By involving the public early on, it gave them ownership in their community. MnDOT can take care of lane widths, pedestrian crossings and multi-use trails, but the community needed to help with the aesthetic side of the project. It was their vision for the sidewalk planters, benches, bike racks, lighting and other specific details that ensured their vision for the community. This vision would serve both the residents and visitors to Grand Marais, resulting in economic and many other benefits.

Describe the innovative participation techniques that were used?

Leading up to construction, meetings were held in person, but as construction got near, so did the pandemic. MnDOT used virtual platforms to host meetings with agencies, stakeholders and the public to ensure the project

stayed on track and everyone was still involved in the process.

MnDOT continued to use more traditional avenues of staying in touch with the public as well including print, social media and radio updates. There continued to be many opportunities for both conversation and real-time updates, and the state provided several tools for people to submit comments regarding the project during the planning phases.

The community's economic tourism was not negatively impacted as initially feared. Visitors were able to access the community, and residents were able to navigate around town effectively. MnDOT maintained a project website, produced regular video updates, updated people via local radio programming, created detour maps for online use and distribution and held weekly update meetings once construction began and sent out weekly emails through the GovDelivery program.

How did the project advance the practice of public participation?

This was so much more than a road project, which means there were multiple organizations, agencies and public participants involved in the planning and construction process. Because of the diversity in interests, the public was encouraged to participate in planning for bike and pedestrian facilities, planters and what was being planted along the corridor, art installations and more. From the business community, it was important to work on access throughout construction and making sure visitors to Grand Marais knew how to find their favorite locations.

By taking the extra time needed to build relationships, it caused agencies, business owners and the general public to trust MnDOT more and more, solidifying a positive work relationship. MnDOT is studying another portion of the Highway 61 corridor, with the urban section through Two Harbors included. Successes and weaknesses learned from the Grand Marais project will help make the Two Harbors project even more successful.

Throughout the years prior to and during the pandemic, MnDOT used both art and science in communicating effectively with local businesses and the residents of Cook County. ~ Ann Sullivan, Cook County Board of Commissioners Chair

What evaluative and monitoring techniques were used throughout the project to provide evidence of public participation?

MnDOT hosted weekly public update meetings and/or sent out weekly email updates on the project. The agency was able to gauge engagement and concerns throughout the project by continuously reaching out to the public. The state's construction manager also stayed in Grand Marais during the project, making himself available for questions at any time.

MnDOT conducted a post-construction survey, asking stakeholders and the general public for feedback on the project. Participants were asked about their familiarity with the project, how they used it or were associated with the project, how they heard about the project and engaged with the project, if they attended meetings and how they thought MnDOT specifically did with engaging them on the project. The results were favorable.

Other evaluation techniques used include a permanent bicycle and pedestrian counter was also installed, which will be part of MnDOT's statewide bicycle and pedestrian counter network, and a Health Impact Assessment was conducted to gauge the health benefits, such as improving walking and biking facilities and economic impacts of the project.

The Grand Marais Art Colony found MnDOT's engagement process with the community to be comprehensive

and thoughtful at all stages from planning to implementation to closure. MNDOT's approach to partnership has resulted in a vastly improved streetscape that ensures safety, health and quality of life in the City of Grand Marais. In particular, we appreciate the collaboration to ensure that the final streetscape can and will accommodate public art. ~ Lyla Brown, Executive Director of the Grand Marais Art Colony

PROJECT RESULTS

Making improvements to the Highway 61 corridor supported tourism-related businesses by making the corridor a destination for walking and biking to visit local attractions. It was designed with safety system goals like safer walking and biking connections, slower traffic speeds and space for public art and other amenities, connecting many key community destinations and improving safety. A Health Impact Assessment was conducted to gauge the health benefits, such as improving walking and biking facilities, and economic impacts of the project. The project also included stormwater improvements to the benefit of the Lake Superior watershed, and failing public utilities were updated.

With the community's visioning process prioritizing multi-modal users, MnDOT focused on incorporating alternative modes of transportation into this project. It improved walking and biking facilities to not only promote community health but also to provide connections for future bike and pedestrian development including the school, courthouse, clinic, hospital and other key community destinations. It made improvements to driveway accesses and improvements between driveways and the sidewalk/trail interface. The multi-use trail through the corridor connects to the Gitchi Gami State Trail, a non-motorized paved trail that follows Lake Superior through Cook and Lake counties. This and future projects will support increased multi-modal access for generations to come.

The innovative land use project created an attractive roadside environment that includes places to gather and rest, plantings to create improved green space, lighting that improved visibility for people biking and walking and intersection lighting while preserving the dark sky environment of the North Shore.

In spite of advance concerns of citizens and business stakeholders, the flows of traffic remained safe and smooth throughout, with heavy trucks diverted and minimal residential noise. We could always get to our destinations — by car and by bike and on foot — through the two construction seasons. At the end, local and agency planning has produced an elegant, intuitive roadway — I'd say almost a parkway — routed through a constrained retail district over-busy with cars, bikes, kids and ever-wandering tourists. ~ Bob Nesheim, Grand Marais resident/Active Living steering committee/City Park and Rec board/Gitchi Gami State Trail board

ALIGNMENT WITH IAP2 CORE VALUES

How did the project ensure that those most affected by the decision or problem were involved? How did the project seek input from participants on how they wished to participate?

From project development to construction, community partners and city leadership were highly engaged in creating public awareness and support for the project, as well as advocating for the community's needs and vision while partnering with MnDOT. Many in the community recognized the shared responsibility of a project of this magnitude. A committee, including Visit Cook County, the Cook County Chamber of Commerce and other stakeholders, created an extensive marketing campaign to effectively ensure visitors to the community were aware of the project and had the knowledge necessary to enjoy the local attractions during the construction period.

How was the outcome of the project influenced by the public's contributions?

With the Sawtooth Mountain Clinic's initiated vision sessions, the public felt they could contribute to the shape of their community. MnDOT was also able to use that as a springboard for construction project. The project developed enhanced accessibility and safety for pedestrians, bicyclists and motorists in Grand Marais, which

is a constant challenge of the byway, specifically in the busy summer months. It was also able to accomplish city-driven improvements like storm water movement, utilities, pavement conditions, ADA accessibility and pedestrian/bicycle safety elements and the continuation of a paved trail. Visitors to Grand Marais will have increased access to city parks, the municipal campground, beaches, restaurants, museums and a direct paved connection to walk or bike to a state wayside rest.

How did the project promote sustainable decisions and ensure that the needs and interests of all participants were communicated?

The decisions being made on this project were planned to last for decades. This project helped other local entities to connect or plan for their future projects as well. Cook County is constructing a Safe Routes to School project in summer 2022 to close the gap in the non-motorized network near a local school. The county is also planning pedestrian improvements on another local route in 2023, better connecting the Cook County Courthouse, clinic and hospital to the YMCA, Highway 61 and the pedestrian network in the community. Stormwater improvements were also made, to the benefit of the Lake Superior watershed, and failing public utilities were updated.

The years MnDOT spent engaging the community, planning, designing, and reconstructing Highway 61 and constructing a multi-use trail through the City of Grand Marais will positively impact the community for decades to come. -Justin Otsea, North Shore Scenic Drive Council Executive Director

How did the project seek out and facilitate the involvement of those most affected?

Throughout the process, many stakeholder and public meetings were held to receive feedback on planning and design. There were meetings held with business owners whose access would be impacted during construction. Prior to construction, MnDOT staff members walked along the Highway 61 corridor, stopping in at each business to invite them to a public meeting and see if they had any final concerns before the construction started. Homeowners along Highway 61 were also engaged, letting them know if there would be any right-of-way concerns during and/or after the project was complete. Groups with special interests like parks and green space, bike and pedestrian connections and local artists were included in outreach as well.

(MnDOT managers) were as flexible and accommodating as laws and contracts allowed in modifying the project to accord with local sensibilities. In their interactions with the community, they were patient and kind even in the face of undeserved abuse. They recognized that this is far more than a road; this is the front door to our community. ~ Jim Boyd, Cook County Chamber of Commerce

How did the information provided to participants contribute to meaningful participation?

From project development to construction, the community partners and city leadership were highly engaged in creating public awareness and support for the project, as well as advocating for the community's needs and vision while partnering with MnDOT. As with most impactful projects, there were some naysayers prior to construction, but the community built the support necessary to make this project a success.

How did the communication ensure that participants knew how their input affected the decision?

To ensure equity for children, people of varying abilities and other non-drivers using Hwy 61 through Grand Marais, the corridor morphed from car centric to one that implemented a Complete Streets concept, providing facilities accessible to users of all modes necessary to move around the community. These improvements encouraged equity in other projects such as constructing a Safe Routes to School project to close the gap in the non-motorized network near a local school. Also, Cook County is planning pedestrian improvements to better connect the Cook County Courthouse, clinic and hospital to the YMCA, Highway 61 and the pedestrian network in the community.