



Case Briefing St. Croix River Crossing Controversy

The U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution assisted Federal Highway Administration and the departments of transportation in Minnesota and Wisconsin to develop a way forward with local stakeholders after decades of conflict over the St. Croix River Crossing Project.

ST. CROIX RIVER CROSSING CONTROVERSY

2001 to 2006

Background

In the 1950s, Stillwater, Minnesota, and Houlton, Wisconsin, began discussing how to improve local transportation. The towns are currently connected by an historic lift bridge over the St. Croix River, a waterway within the Wild and Scenic River System. In 1995, federal and state transportation agencies decided to build a new bridge and remove the lift bridge. But an environmental group successfully challenged this decision in court. By 2000, the intersection of three public policy goals – enhancement of transportation services, preservation of historic resources, and protection of a wild and scenic river – had produced gridlock among state and federal transportation, environmental and historic protection agencies.



The U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution's Role

In 2001, the Federal Highway Administration and the departments of transportation in both states requested the assistance of the U.S. Institute. Based on a U.S. Institute assessment and recommendations, the agencies agreed to participate in a collaborative process involving both private and public stakeholders. In 2002, a group of 27 agency and non-agency stakeholders began meeting to find a collaborative solution. This was part of the project development and NEPA review process.

Results & Accomplishments

The three-year collaborative process resulted in an agreement among 26 of 27 stakeholders to retain the lift bridge as a pedestrian and bicycle crossing and add a new, signature bridge for vehicular traffic. To address the natural, social, and cultural impacts of the new bridge, they agreed on a comprehensive mitigation package. Direct impact mitigation measures include wetland replacement, relocation of threatened and endangered species, and river bluff restoration. Additional measures went well beyond compensating for the new bridge's direct impacts with removal of visual intrusions from the waterway, funding for lift bridge preservation and designation of Stillwater as a historic district, building government capacity for growth management, and a basin-wide water quality study.

- This case highlights both the importance and the challenge of integrating collaborative problem solving into NEPA reviews. After three years of intense negotiation, conflict that had simmered for over 50 years was resolved and the NEPA process was completed.

- Use of a computer design tool that allowed stakeholders to suggest changes and see what different bridge designs would look like overlaid on photos and graphics of the area proved instrumental in resolving disagreements over the proposed bridge.
- In addition to an innovative mitigation package, the agreement calls for continuing involvement of non-agency stakeholders. Many will sit on project oversight panels to assure implementation of the final agreement.

Relationships and communication among stakeholders improved remarkably during the collaborative process. In the words of one participant,

“We were able to spend the time necessary to get over our natural inclination to not trust people from the other side... We had enough time and enough space to come to a conclusion that everybody could feel comfortable with.”

However, one stakeholder – the Sierra Club – did not endorse the agreement and filed suit to challenge the project. While almost all the challenges were dismissed, the National Park Service was ordered to supplement its impact determination under the Wild and Scenic River Act; instead the Park Service reversed its prior approval and determined that the project could not go forward without a Congressional exemption. Legislation is currently pending. In the meantime, work on some aspects of the project has been suspended while some continues.

Credits

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