

## MEMORANDUM TO FILE

FROM: Beth Bartz  
Senior Associate

DATE: September 25, 2001

RE: SUMMARY OF STAKEHOLDER MEETING AT HOUSTON; AUGUST 13, 2001

**Purpose:** To obtain input from local governments, area merchants and visitor service providers, and local chambers of commerce and tourism organizations regarding perceptions of visitor experience to the area and how improvements to the TH 16 Scenic Byway could improve that experience.

**Present:** Ron Witt, Tri-County Record  
Larry Bartelson, City of Rushford  
Al Morken, City of Rushford  
Kathy Hartl, HBC  
Mark Anderson, Mn/DOT  
Terry Wolf, Minnesota Meeting Planner  
Marlene Schultz, HBC  
John Prinzler, Houston County News  
Beth Bartz, SRF

Ms. Bartz provided a summary of the Corridor Management Plan process and explained the purpose of this meeting in that process.

Mark Anderson, Mn/DOT Scenic Byways coordinator, explained that TH 16 become a state scenic byway in 1996-1997 and explained that the purpose of the Scenic Byways program is to give more exposure to roadways with scenic qualities.

The following observations and concerns were shared by the group:

### Historic Bluff Country attractions

- TH 16 used to be the main route from Chicago to the Black Hills and Yellowstone. Need to get tourists off I-90 and back down here. TH 16 has been rerouted, but old portion of TH 16 still exists near Houston.
- “Silk Stocking Avenue” in Rushford has a great collection of turn-of-the-century homes.
- Rushford depot another source of community pride. It’s the oldest depot in the area (1867) remaining in its original location.
- Bike trail usage is increasing during the week.

- Lefse Factory, open in the fall, is another potential visitor attraction. They will give tours by arrangement. (Two factories in the area – Blaire and Rushford.)
- Other Rushford attractions include the 1876 stone brewery and the 1876 Old Mill.
- 300 miles of snowmobile trails are available in the area.
- Could TH 16 become Minnesota’s “Wall Drug?”
- Native American history could also be a draw. Rushford has mounds.
- Genealogy is also an attraction.
- Many nice golf facilities in the area – Ferndale (outside of Rushford) is a very nice 9-hole course.
- Rice Pharmacy in Caledonia has a nice collection of old post cards.
- Pederson has a beautifully restored depot and nice B&B rooms.
- “Pie Wars” – pie in Pederson competing with pie in Whalen.

### Visitor information

- Visitors are looking for more area attractions. Hard to make connections to attraction.
- Would like visitors to come back in the off-season, but need places for them to stay and spend money.
- Estimates are that it takes about an hour longer to take TH 16 instead of I-90 from La Crescent to Dexter.
- Sturgis cyclers also use TH 16.
- Growing segment among more mature tourists is the “soft adventure” – canoeing, Eagle Bluff Learning Center.
- A “writer’s” tour, aimed at magazine writers, may develop interest in the area. Maybe one focused on golf courses.
- Fifty percent of tourism tends to come from within state, visits from friends and relatives. Need to market to local community as well. A trip organized to familiarize local people with local attractions may be beneficial as well.
- Motorcoach tours require a 22- to 25-room facility for overnight stays. Prefer double-double rooms. Also like handicap rooms, valet service, light refreshments, and things to walk to.
- Motorcoach tour operators look for a variety of attractions and availability of alternative transportation modes to facilitate options for individuals on the tour. History/nostalgia themes often attractive to motorcoach tourists.

### Physical improvements

- Rushford is as guilty regarding bad signage as anyone, especially to Magelssen Park.
- Signage is a big problem. Would also like to see consistency in signage types and styles.

### Challenges

- Biker’s don’t spend at the same level as snowmobilers.
- Key is finding balance between visitor facilities and preserving small town character.

- Houston has a 6-8 B&B limit; Lanesboro maybe overemphasizes B&Bs.

### Community Support for National Scenic Byway designation

- Rushford is potentially a source of support for the National Scenic Byway nomination. They are interested in obtaining copy of resource spreadsheet, possibly for posting on the web.
- SE Minnesota League of Municipalities is another potential source of support for Scenic Byway nomination.

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FROM: Beth Bartz  
Senior Associate

DATE: September 25, 2001

RE: SUMMARY OF STAKEHOLDER MEETING AT PRESTON; AUGUST 13, 2001

**Purpose:** To obtain input from local governments, area merchants and visitor service providers, and local chambers of commerce and tourism organizations regarding perceptions of visitor experience to the area and how improvements to the TH 16 Scenic Byway could improve that experience.

**Present:** Jan Christopherson, The Historical Society  
Rosalie Kruegel, S.V. Historical Society  
Lois VanderPlas, Maple Springs Campground  
Kathy Hartl, SE ME Historical Bluff Country  
Robert Pederson, City of Chatfield  
Barbara Hoyhtya, City of Lanesboro  
Jill Underwood, Commonwealth Theatre Company  
Verdon Hasleiet, Visitor  
Donald Eickhoff, CITY OF WYKOFF  
Clarence Quanrud, City of Preston  
Mark Anderson, Mn/DOT  
Beth Bartz, SRF

Ms. Bartz provided a summary of the Corridor Management Plan process and explained the purpose of this meeting in that process.

Mark Anderson, Mn/DOT Scenic Byways coordinator, explained that TH 16 become a state scenic byway in 1996-1997 and explained that the purpose of the Scenic Byways program is to give more exposure to roadways with scenic qualities.

The following observations and concerns were shared by the group:

### Historic Bluff Country attractions

- Bike trail is the area's largest draw. "How far are you from the bike trail?" is a common question.
- Forestville, Mystery Cave and downtown Lanesboro are also favorite attractions.
- Amish, caves and camping are big draws to the area.
- Laura Ingalls Wilder sites draw both national and international visitors. Visitors have lots of interest in highway signage.
- Community festivals also draw visitors in. (One Arizona couple attending recent Chatfield festival noted how much they enjoyed the bluffs.) County fair is also a draw.
- Growing informal use of TH 16 area for Classic Car tours.

- Forestville State Park contains 145 species of birds – a draw for those who like to bird watch.
- Chatfield’s concerts in the park on Thursday evening are a popular visitor activity.
- Potential for a farm interpretive activity was raised, although it was also noted that liability insurance is often an issue.
- Agricultural tourism could be a draw for the area. Financial support for barn restoration would help preserve rural character.
- Chatfield is an important gateway community to the area. Poppen Young museum is moving to Chatfield (executive offices have always been there.)
- Wykoff’s museum was recently featured on national TV.
- Quaintness, beautiful old homes and community cleanliness are also a draw – preservation of a way of life.
- “We can best serve our visitors by serving ourselves – building a town we want to live in.”

### Visitor information

- Seventy-five percent of visitors come from the metro area. Austin and Albert Lea are also sources of visitors.
- Mayo Clinic is also a large source of visitors, particularly on afternoons and weekends between appointments. These visitors have special needs – they often don’t have independent transportation. Rochester Express bus line does make some runs to Historic Bluff Country.
- Visitor audience are primarily families and retire people; the relaxed tourist.
- “Word of mouth” is an important source of visitor information. “Word of mouth” is best supported by “hospitality” – need to encourage more smiling, engaging visitors by merchants and service providers.
- Distribution of materials, magazine articles reinforce “word of mouth.”
- “People” bring people back.
- Return business is important, and hospitality is important for encouraging return business.
- Good feedback has been received regarding HBC’s driving tours.
- The internet is mentioned by visitors as one of their primary information sources and should be considered an “entry point.” The Lanesboro web site is a “big help.”
- “Backroads” publication a good resource for visitor information.
- Northfield Theater has been running an audience survey all summer to determine why attendees are coming to the area.
- Visitor centers have staffing challenges. Chatfield uses volunteers to staff the information center, but does pretty well in offering a range of hours. Lanesboro and Harmony have paid staff. Chatfield has at most 8-10 visitors a day stopping at their information center (even though 8,600 cars a day pass on TH 52.) Most know where they want to go in the area before they get there. How might businesses support visitor centers?

## Physical Improvements

- Signage is critical. Signs on I-90 directing visitors to the area would be very helpful. Historic Bluff Country had previously paid for a billboard on I-90 outside of Austin, but was discontinued due to cost. Would an “alternate route” sign be a possibility?
- Scenic Byway map should be extended to I-90 to reinforce connection to this visitor source. (State information centers should also be shown.)
- Many out of state visitors complain about signage. Many back roads are not well marked, although the County roads now are. Township roads rarely have signage.
- Preston signage to Forestville State Park was taken down because the County did not want traffic directed to a gravel road.
- Signage is needed from TH 16 to smaller communities (e.g. Wykoff).
- TH 52 corridor is dangerous – narrow and winding with minimal shoulders. Scheduled to be redone in 2003.
- Small rest areas near Preston and Pederson, canoe launch areas are opportunities for improvements.
- DNR did a nice job with handicap accessibility improvements below dam in Lanesboro. Can signage for accessibility be improved?

## Challenges

- Tourism to the area is very weather dependent. Recreation (biking, hiking, trout fishing, snowmobiling) is a focus of visitor activity. Poor weather conditions dramatically decrease number of visitors. Flooding, and metro area reports overstating the impacts of the flooding, dramatically reduced visitor numbers several years ago.
- Gas prices also affect numbers of visitors.
- Visitors also complain about shops not being open at night. Many merchants do not want to be open at night. Communities agree – would be detrimental to “small town character.” Owners have a hard time finding staff for stores. Often owners are the only ones to tend the store and therefore can only offer limited hours. Often cannot find staff during the non-summer seasons to keep shops open at night or seven days a week. On off-season Mondays, restaurants are often not open.
- “For Sale” signs on “Main Street” also put visitors off.
- Interchange at TH 52 and I-90 is confusing and dangerous.
- Farmers don’t want people driving through farms.
- Visitor improvements must be paid for by the City; the burden is born by property owners as the area has minimal industrial tax base.
- Weekend or second-home buyers from the metro area are driving home and land prices up.
- Counties are trying to address development issues by trying to prohibit development on the bluffs. Townships are getting very protective.

### Community Support for National Scenic Byway designation

- Representatives from Preston, Chatfield and Lanesboro expected support from their communities.
- Merchant support was not well represented by the group.

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Beth Bartz  
Senior Associate

FROM: Jen Schulz  
Environmental Planner

DATE: September 13, 2001

SUBJECT: TH 16 SCENIC BYWAY, PUBLIC STAKEHOLDER COMMENTS

Generally, visitors and public-land managers would like to see more signs posted on TH 16 – some specifically stated that mileage on signs would be helpful. Due to the Mn/DOT sign policy, some lands are not allowed to have signs where they feel would be most helpful. (e.g. Beaver Creek State Park does not have any signs directing visitors off TH 16 to the park.) Also, it was repeated that Mn/DOT now charges the DNR and other agencies for installing the signs on the highway – some do not have budgets for this.

Few stakeholders identified road conditions or facilities as a problem, with the exception of the Forestville State Park manager, who stated that CSAH 5 leading into the park does not meet current standards. Public land managers felt that facilities were mostly adequate for serving current visitors and accommodating resources for maintenance. One comment was made concerning the need for more pull-offs and scenic overlooks. It was noted that the USFWS is installing viewing platforms and pull-offs along Hwy 26 for the Mississippi Valley; similar facilities would enhance both the scenic opportunities and safety of TH 16.

Most did not feel that further promotion of the Byway would result in a significant increase in visitor rates. Some said that designation would probably minimally increase visitor numbers, but parks, trails, rivers and streams are destinations significant enough for attracting visitors themselves. However, the overall feeling was that promotion and interpretive development of the Byway would only compliment use of public lands.

Feelings were split in regard to negative concerns or impacts. Some noted a concern for potential over-development with further promotion attracting more people to the area and more economic opportunities for businesses. “We don’t want to see another Wisconsin Dells here.” Over-development could threaten the sensitive landscape (karst terrain), groundwater quality, and resource protection. Others didn’t think that promotion would cause enough growth in visitor rates to cause significant negative impacts.

All stakeholders felt that any promotion, development, or further program enhancement along the Byway may be met with some opposition or difficulty due to so much of the region’s land being privately owned.