

# St. Croix River Crossing Controversy 2001 - 2006

**Location:** Minnesota & Wisconsin

## Background

In the 1950s, Stillwater, MN and Houlton, WI 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. In 2001, the Federal Highway Administration and the two state departments of transportation requested the assistance of the U.S. Institute. After conducting a conflict assessment, the Institute made recommendations on how to proceed toward a negotiated agreement.

The parties agreed to participate in the recommended collaborative process involving both private and public stakeholders. This was part of the project development and NEPA review process. In 2002, a group of 27 agency and non-agency stakeholders began meeting to find a collaborative solution.

## Highlights/Innovation

- 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.
- 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.



## Results and Accomplishments

The three-year collaborative process resulted in an agreement to retain the lift bridge as a pedestrian and bicycle crossing. In addition, a new, signature bridge for vehicular traffic is to be constructed. To address the natural, social, and cultural impacts of the new bridge, a comprehensive mitigation package was developed.

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. The agreement calls for removal of visual intrusions from the waterway, funding for lift bridge preservation and designation of Stillwater as a historic district. It even includes building government capacity for growth management and a basin-wide water quality study.

Relationships and communication among stakeholders also 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."*

## Credits

### Partners from National Roster of ECR Practitioners

Jack Wofford, private practice, Assessment  
Jody Erikson and Michael A. Hughes  
The Keystone Center (both formerly with RESOLVE, Inc.)  
Mediation Team

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