

North Country Scenic Byways Council
Meeting Minutes
May 7th, 2008

Attendees: Norman Charest, Betsey Harding, Cynthia Briggs, Greg Placy, Chris Thayer, and Jayne O'Conner.
Guests: Dean Eastman and Bill Watson (NHDOT)
Staff: Mary Deppe and Michael King (NCC)

Welcomes & Introductions

The meeting began at 10:10 at the NCC offices. Mary Deppe introduced Mr. Dean Eastman, the new State Scenic Byways Coordinator, and Mr. Bill Watson from the NHDOT. Everyone around the table introduced themselves.

Scenic Byways Program Updates

Mr. Eastman explained to the group that he accepted the State Scenic Byways Coordinator position at NHDOT in December of 2007, shortly after the administration of the program returned to NHDOT (Department of Transportation) from NHOEP (Office of Energy and Planning). At the present time, Eastman has been busy with the following tasks:

- Reviewing the 19 current projects, most of which are from 2006-2007, and figuring out which ones need to be closed out, approved by G&C or resume work.
- Changing the Scenic Byways contract process from what OEP used, to the Municipal Agreement format the NHDOT uses with all of its projects. (Formal agreement between NHDOT and an established non-profit or local government.)
- Move the program forward by dealing with the issues from the past and wiping the slate clean.

Bill Watson explained the contract process with the NHDOT and discussed how the process needed to be changed because the former was not in compliance with the terms and conditions of the Federal Highways Administration (FHWA). One of the issues is the OEP ran Scenic Byways as a grant program, when in actuality, it is a reimbursement program. Funding should never have been given out to recipients until the work had been completed. When it was discovered that had happened, it was an issue that needed to be resolved.

Watson went on to explain the FHWA takes ownership of not handling the program well, but NHDOT and NHOEP are ultimately responsible for the administration of contracts and the fact that FHWA rules were not being met.

Mr. Eastman explained that the Scenic Byways program was designed to be a flexible, grass-roots program, but it eventually became one that did not receive sufficient guidance. One of the major things that DOT is going to be looking in the future is whether or not a project is about a byway and its users, or if it is a project where a byway just happens to go through it? If the later is the case, it is not going to receive funding. The idea behind this is to spend the funding on real byway projects that are going to positively influence the byway experience.

Eastman explained that both National and State Scenic Byways are eligible for federal funding. He also explained that in the future, NHOEP has a one-person role on the State Scenic Byways Council and otherwise has no involvement.

There were questions from the committee about the role of the Regional Scenic Byways Councils and how relevant they are. Mr. Eastman explained that DOT can't run the program alone and that the Regional Councils are the most knowledgeable about which projects in their regions should be funded first. The State Council is needed for that same role as well as to develop the criteria. He explained that the State Council is required by law and that 9 out of the 15 members must be appointed/re-appointed by the governor every three years, with a chair person rotating each year. This has not been done in the past and once the ball is rolling again and the program is running smoothly, either the rules will be followed or a request to change the laws can be made. Eastman explained that the Governor must be consulted about this and decide where he would like to go with it, until then, the 15 member committee will remain unchanged. He then handed out RSA's that explained this.

Eastman explained that the process right now is to move forward with the projects they have, to figure out which ones are out of compliance, and to deal with them properly. He also explained that DOT will be setting up a website to manage the NH Scenic Byways and to make all of the project information available to everyone.

One of the major funding criteria that will be considered in the future is the number of byway users that will benefit from the project. Eastman suggested asking yourself that question before applying for funding.

Michael King asked Mr. Eastman and Mr. Watson what the North Country Scenic Byways Council can do to help move the process forward. Eastman responded that communication will be very important in moving forward and that he will make sure we have all of our questions answered by FHWA. He also explained that in order for a group to be self-sustainable and not rely on FHWA for funding, people should consider looking for support from retail groups and Chambers of Commerce. He also suggested looking at what other states are doing with their programs.

Bill Watson explained that a number of projects will be on "hold" until FHWA sees that there is documentation that projects are eligible, legitimate, and reasonable. DOT is uncertain at this time how long it will take. There will be a meeting with FHWA next week, and that may or may not provide some more answers.

Watson mentioned that on May 19th at NHDOT in Concord, there will be a meeting about Municipally Managed funding, and everyone that will apply for Scenic Byways funding in the future should consider attending.

Jayne O'Connor suggested that until NCC gets the funding back to run the North Country Scenic Byways Council, maybe another organization needs to chair the committee.

There was some discussion about how most of the roads in District 1 are designated as State or National Scenic Byways. The group discussed meeting to discuss this and possible make a recommendation to the State SB Council about which roads should remain designated and which roads should be removed from the list. Eastman said that FHWA may view this favorably as a positive step in managing the byway.

There was some discussion about the status of the 19 open Scenic Byways projects. Mr. Eastman will email the list and status report and the map of the State and National Scenic Byways to Mary Deppe and she will distribute it to the rest of the group. There was also some discussion about the status of specific projects from around the region.

Someone suggested having project updates become a standing item on the NC Scenic Byways Council agenda so we can see which ones are moving, which ones are not, and how we can help to move them along.

There was some discussion about the next meeting. Chris Thayer offered the AMC Highland Center as a meeting place. The date July 22nd, from 10-12 was discussed (and later confirmed) as the next meeting date. Topics for discussion that were mentioned include:

- Reviewing and possibly editing the bylaws,
- Discussing the Corridor Management Plan,
- Organization of the Committee/Board,
- Re-defining the region,
- Project Updates,
- Future needs and projects.

Eastman agreed to give guidance and information about what will happen with the program.

The meeting adjourned at noon.

Minutes Submitted by:
Mary Deppe
5/9/08