

**“Rangeley Lakes Scenic Byway:
An Opportunity to Improve Safety and Enhance Local Attractions
While Preserving the Historic Character of the Region”**

I. Background and Benefits (Byway-based Projects)

The Rangeley Lakes Scenic Byway achieved National Byway designation in 2000. This designation has been a gift to the residents of the Rangeley region because it has given the region unprecedented access to Scenic Byway funds for corridor improvements while increasing its effectiveness in campaigning for regular maintenance and reconstruction funds.

The story of the Byway’s success began in 1998 when over 22 stakeholders, residents, and concerned citizens came together to form a CORRIDOR ADVOCACY GROUP (CAG). The purpose of the CAG was to discuss whether or not it should seek National Scenic Byway designation for portions of Routes 17 and 4 in Franklin and Oxford County. Over the course of 12-14 months, the CAG agreed to pursue designation, worked together to define the boundaries of the Byway, and wrote the Corridor Management Plan (CMP) for what is now known as the Rangeley Lakes Scenic Byway.

The Byway’s CMP is founded on three basis principles: **Partnership** (communities along the Byway will work together to address both shared problems and each other’ individual and unique concerns), **Equity** (communities pledge to support each other to insure that each community experiences positive long and short term benefits from Byway projects), and **Concurrency** (participants pledge to ensure that necessary investments are made to address existing problems concurrently with any investments that will have the effect of accommodating tourism growth),

Created through the thoughtful discussion and input of many people representing diverse interests, the CMP presents a broad Vision for the Byway as well as a number of goals, strategies, and objectives. The Vision speaks of the need to retain the road for traditional industrial uses while promoting increased recreational use. The Vision also speaks to the need to enhance and preserve the historic character of the road rather than change it. The Goals, Objectives, and Strategies outline the ways to meet and support this Vision. Finally, the CAG members were able to agree that the Byway-related projects needed to be grassroots in nature, and that attempts by MDOT or FHWA to secure abutting lands through takings that are opposed by CAG or others would cause the Byway to cease to exist.

The CMP also calls for the creation of a Scenic Byway Council that is made up of local officials and concerned citizens and the employment of a Byway Coordinator. The Council advises the Coordinator, and the Coordinator acts as a liaison between the Council and MDOT/FHWA.

The Council and the Coordinator work directly with MDOT on all the Byway-related projects, despite the fact that 80% of the funds for the Byway projects come from FHWA. Depending on the type of the project we are engaged in, we work with MDOT landscape architects, engineers, and planners; we have virtually no contact with the FHWA staff except when we write grants for Byway project funds. MDOT provides the expertise, the manpower, the facilities and the equipment to complete these projects while we provide the creative and critical input that make these projects reflect the character of our Byway while improving the visitor’s experience on them. It goes without saying that without the funding and assistance from MDOT and FHWA, we could not initiate, much less complete these projects on our own.

Becoming a National Scenic Byway has been a very positive experience, and one that has enabled the communities to make improvements virtually free of charge.

The following are examples of the projects that we have completed or initiated in partnership with MDOT using MDOT and FHWA funds and expertise.

Maine Scenic Byway Logo:

Several years ago, MDOT invited the Council to help design the Maine Scenic Byway logo. In concert with other Byways throughout the state, the Council participated in the selection of the graphic designer. Then the Council helped choose the image and the color palette from several proposed designs. As a result of this team effort, the logo represents the diverse character and natural features of the State as well as the commonalities between all the State's Byways.

Interpretive Panels:

In a similar project involving the creation of interpretive panels to be installed at Byway overlooks in Western Maine, the Council picked the themes to be represented, wrote the stories, and worked with MDOT to pick the panel designer. The designer then met with us several times and worked with us and historical societies, local historians, and other residents to select images and text that reflected the cultural, recreational and natural richness of our region through the centuries. The end product is 15 informative panels of such quality and beauty that we could not have created them on our own.

Whip Willow Farm Overlook:

During the creation of our Whip Willow Farm Overlook project, we worked with MDOT to select a qualified engineer and landscape architect to design the Overlook. Once the engineer/landscape architect firm was selected, we worked with their staff directly to design the overlook and select the materials to be used in it. As a result the Overlook reflects the historic character of the Byway community while providing a safe pullout with a view that has been enhanced for visitors and residents alike.

Height of Land Overlook Project:

The Height of Land on Route 17 is one of the most spectacular overlooks in the State. Perched high above the shore of Mooselookmeguntic Lake and offering panoramic views of the distant lakes and mountains, this informal roadside turnout has been inspiring travelers for nearly a century. By partnering with MDOT the council is working to improve safety at the Overlook while retaining the incredible view. The Council participated in the selection of the engineering firm in charge of designing the improved overlook and has provided input as to its visual and functional design. MDOT has met with the Council on several occasions to insure that the design meets local approval and safety standards. All that remains now is to secure the funding for this project.

Route 4 Reconstruction Project:

On our Route 4 Reconstruction project, we worked with MDOT to determine where the new alignment would be, what kinds of retaining walls would be used, where the turnouts would be, and what kind of tree removal would occur. We have since learned that if MDOT had not been willing to meet with us, we would have ended up with a safe and well-engineered road, but not one that reflected the historical character of the road. For example, the numerous retaining walls would have been constructed of safe, but not terribly attractive or native-looking concrete blocks. If we had not worked with them, there would be ugly concrete block retaining walls, vast treeless sections, and a straight and ugly road. We would have entirely lost the character of our road.

Rangeley and Oquossoc Restrooms:

The Byway has received funds to construct year round public restrooms in the Towns of Rangeley and Oquossoc to accommodate the visitors that fuel the local economy. The Council partnered with local groups to form a restroom committee to design the interior and exterior of the two restrooms (the interiors will be the same, the exteriors will be designed to match the individual characters of the two towns). The two Towns have been trying to build restrooms for more than 10 years but lacked the funding to do so; the Byway is providing over 80% of the funds available, so that the Towns can meet an otherwise unachievable goal.

Pending Projects:

The Council has applied for Byway funds to complete three more projects in the next few years: the Smalls Falls safety improvements and walking trail project, the Rangeley Overlook safety

improvements project, and the Outdoor Sporting Heritage Museum project. All three projects would be prohibitively expensive to complete without Byway funds, and it is safe to say, they would not be completed without Byway funds.

As of today, our Byway has rec'd over \$750,000 in 80/20 funds for overlooks, interpretive panels, public restrooms and administrative support. We have recently applied for over \$260,000 in funds for a museum-based project and two overlooks. If Routes 4 and 17 had not been designated a National Scenic Byway, we would not have the ability to construct any of these features.

For a community that wants to improve its aesthetic appearance, increase its vehicular and passenger safety, and compete more effectively for regular maintenance and repairs, the National Scenic Byway program is a terrific partner. If towns along a Byway are interested enhancing the aesthetics of the corridor while improving the road, the safety for its pedestrians, bikes, and vehicles, while leveraging MDOT maintenance dollars, the Byways program is a great vehicle for doing so.

II. National Scenic Byway Funding

The National designation means that the road is pretty spectacular and worthy of protection and enhancement. Because of its designation, it gets to apply for funds from a special set of funds that other roads are not eligible for. There are 8 different types of Byway projects that are eligible for funding, and individual Byways apply for these funds based on the types of projects they wish to complete (guidance on these 8 types can be found at www.bywaysonline.org)

Currently, the FHWA and the state governments work together on all road projects with an 80/20 split (the feds pay 80% and the States pay 20%) - **they are already working together on the road maintenance and reconstruction projects for Routes 113 and 2; they will continue to work together regardless of whether the corridor receives designation.** As partners, the FHWA's role is to determine the safety standards that need to be incorporated into a given road project, while to get the funding, MDOT needs to meet those standards.

This partnership between MDOT and FHWA will not change if and when Routes 2 and 113 receive Byway designation. FHWA and MDOT will continue to fund the maintenance and reconstruction activities, while the Byways funds from successful grant applications will pay for the Byway projects. The responsibility of maintaining the road will remain with FHWA and MDOT and will not be turned over to the towns along the corridor.

It is important to remember that the CAG and the Rangeley Lakes Scenic Byway Council were willing participants in the Byway process. They believed then, and continue to believe that being a Byway is a positive thing that brings funds to the corridor that were not available at the local level. It also brings the Byway region to the attention of MDOT, the Governor, and the legislature; this is important when small towns such as Gilead and Stow are competing for funds against larger more heavily populated towns and cities

If there were a situation/case in which a two or more towns could not agree on whether a Byway-based project should move forward (types of projects include safety improvements, byway facilities, interpretive materials, resource protection, etc), neither MDOT nor FHWA will impose a decision on the towns. It would be up to the towns to decide what they wanted to do (our CMP contains the principles of Equity, Partnership, and Concurrence that provide the basis under which disputes should be addressed). This is a community-based program and decisions such as the type, design, and locations of various projects are determined at the local level.

The only reimbursement account associated with our Byway is the administrative seed grant that pays my salary and expenses. The rest of our grant money goes from MDOT directly to the contractor that is doing the particular job or working on a project.

Based on all the Byway conferences I have attended, there are almost as many strategies to handle the administrative seed grant funds as there are different byways.

During the discussions with MDOT and FHWA regarding designation, and based on the advice of these two agencies, the CAG's should figure out the strategy that works best for them. In our case, we partnered with a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization to serve as our fiscal agent; the 501(c)(3) pays my salary and associated byway expenses up front, and then seeks reimbursement from MDOT.

The Old Canada Road and Schoodic Scenic Byway manage their funding differently than we do; you would have to ask them for the particulars.

Regardless of how the seed grant and other grant monies are administered. MDOT is obliged to maintain the Byway overlooks and all other amenities that it owns, including interpretive panels. The Scenic Byways program never really ends, unless of course the Council deliberately withdraws its participation. While the Council will not have to assume financial responsibility for the amenities, it is up to the Council to keep MDOT's attention on them – phone calls, letters, etc that will remind MDOT of its obligations. To date, we have found that MDOT is very receptive to our reminders and has become willing to change some of its policies to improve the Byway.

Submitted by Rebecca Kurtz
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