

Case Study: MINNESOTA HIGHWAY SPONSORSHIP PROGRAM

Many State DOTs across the country operate Adopt-A-Highway and Highway Sponsorship programs to leverage public-private partnerships to share maintenance responsibilities and improve highway aesthetics. However, the innovative Highway Sponsorship program designed by the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) goes well beyond the traditional erecting a sponsor recognition sign in exchange for simple landscaping and litter collection. Instead, the MnDOT Highway Sponsorship program gives private companies and civic organizations the opportunity to collaborate with MnDOT to develop and implement a wide range of highway beautification and maintenance projects. The program promotes long-term partnerships for projects that meet the needs of the program sponsor as well as MnDOT goal of improving highway aesthetics and sustainability.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > **The MnDOT Highway Sponsorship program represents an innovative use of highway right-of-way.** The program enables a wide range of projects that address statewide aesthetic and environmental goals and priorities, projects that would not otherwise be possible.
- > **The program promotes collaboration and long-term partnerships with private sector and civic partners.** The collaborative process allows Sponsors and MnDOT to identify, design, and implement projects of mutual interest. Long-term partnerships enable complex and high-quality projects.
- > **The program helps MnDOT be more responsive to community needs and priorities.** The Highway Sponsorship program allows the agency to leverage outside resources to respond to stakeholder complaints about highway litter or lack of landscaping and support community environmental goals and priorities.

Program Overview

Traditional Adopt-a-Highway programs, which date back to the 1980s and operate in nearly every state, recruit companies to organize regular volunteer trash collection efforts for a given segment of a highway. Highway Sponsorship programs typically include litter removal as well as landscaping plantings and maintenance. Instead of organizing volunteer efforts, highway sponsors pay a fee to have either the State DOT or a private vendor do the litter pick up or landscaping. Many states operate both types of programs, often contracting out administration of the program to a private vendor specializing in such programs.

The Minnesota Highway Sponsorship program involves a much closer partnership between the agency and the sponsor. Sponsorship agreements (“licenses”) are typically for 3 to 5 years, though the statute allows up to 10 years depending on the nature of the project. The program supports development of a wide range of highway beautification projects designed through a collaborative process that is designed to integrate the needs of both the program sponsor as well as meet MnDOT goals and objectives.

Figure 1 illustrates the general project categories, but projects are not required to fit discretely within a given category.

Figure 1. Potential project types for highway sponsorship



Source: Minnesota DOT, 2021 Highway Sponsorship Introduction Slide Deck

More detailed examples of possible projects include:

- Gateway landscaping at entrances to downtowns and commercial districts on state highways
- Landscaping for traffic calming through rural communities
- Enhanced landscaping adjacent to businesses or corporate campuses
- Pollinator habitat expansion
- Roadside habitat maintenance and enhancement plantings for ground nesting species and wildlife protection through small animal exclusionary fencing
- Art and placemaking projects
- Educational and interpretative panels supporting scenic byways
- Noisewall painting and maintenance
- Evaluating the aesthetics and visual quality of highway corridors

The process to enter a highway sponsorship with MnDOT is collaborative, and involves the following steps:

1. Sponsor submits a highway sponsorship concept with site map
2. Pre-proposal Consultation meeting with MnDOT
3. Sponsor submits highway a sponsorship proposal with site map, installation plan, maintenance plan, etc.
4. MnDOT proposal review (up to 30 days)
5. Consultation and design adjustment (as determined by MnDOT's review)
6. Highway Sponsorship License Review Meeting
7. Project execution: Installation or maintenance begins
8. If allowable, a "Beautify Minnesota" sponsor acknowledgement sign displaying the sponsor organization's name or logo is installed by MnDOT
9. Annual check-in meeting between sponsor and MnDOT for the duration of the license

The period between submission of the initial concept and project execution is approximately 120 days.

Implementation and Operations

The MnDOT Highway Sponsorship program was enabled by Minnesota Statutes Section § 160.801, passed in 2017. The statute enables the DOT to "enter into volunteer agreements with businesses, civic groups or individuals to support, maintain and make improvements to real property included in the trunk highway system¹." The legislation established a special revenue fund to collect sponsorship revenue and contains a provision that prohibits program activities that result in the loss or return of federal highway funds.

The list of activities supported by the statute is as follows:

- (1) work to create, protect, and enhance pollinator habitat along highway rights-of-way;
- (2) work to pick up litter along roadsides;
- (3) work to install enhancements, including landscaping materials, on trunk highway property;
- (4) financial support provided to the department for specific roadside improvements;
- (5) financial support consisting of the sponsor hiring a professional landscape contractor to install vegetation, maintain landscape plantings, or pick up litter, or for other similar activities along a selected area of highway right-of-way; or
- (6) installation of features that enhance the aesthetics of trunk highway property or the amenities available to highway users.

This list, though basic in nature, is introduced with the clause "include, but are not limited to". This allowed MnDOT to design the program, launched in 2018, to encompass a more dynamic range of activities consistent with the intent of the statute. The program is administered by a single staff person, the Program Director, who carries out all program duties and coordinates program activities with other MnDOT offices, as necessary.

¹ Trunk highway system is a network of interstates, state, and scenic highways that connect communities, ports, and other key infrastructure or portions of the state.

Since 2019, the program has generated two dozen inquiries for sponsorships, primarily for projects in the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area (70%), and the rest for projects throughout the state. Sponsors find out about the program in various ways. Sometimes, they are the result of citizen complaints to MnDOT regarding persistent litter or lack of vegetation when MnDOT reaches out to potential partners to resolve the issue.

In its first two years of operation, the program developed three highway sponsorship licenses. In 2021, five to seven more projects were under development. Ultimately, MnDOT expects to operate about a dozen projects at a time statewide.

Under the program's first Sponsorship License, Andersen Corporation provided screening mitigation and landscaping services along a stretch of Highway 95 in front of the company's Bayport industrial facility. The project was initiated at the request of the City of Bayport, motivated by a desire to preserve the city's scenic views. Under the sponsor license that began in Fall of 2018, Andersen assumed the cost of the design, plantings, and installation of roadside landscaping, and pays its own employees for ongoing maintenance. The highway segment is also part of MnDOT's Adopt-A-Highway program, and thus coordination between the programs was necessary to ensure that Adopt-A-Highway volunteers would not conduct litter picks at the same time as landscaping activities were occurring. Acknowledgement signs for both Andersen and the Adopt-A-Highway volunteer group had to be located at opposite ends of the segment to comply with FHWA regulations regarding sponsorship acknowledgements in the right-of-way.²

The second highway sponsorship project, also implemented in Fall 2018, focused on the expanded maintenance of greenways along I-694 at East River Road adjacent to Fridley's Park of Commerce, an office complex owned by project sponsor Industrial Equities. Under the agreement, Industrial Equities is responsible for tree removal, fence installation, maintenance, and litter collection.

In early summer 2019, a third sponsorship project created a pollinator habitat along a segment of TH 52 (trunk highway) just south of Saint Paul in the agricultural community of Vermillion. Two non-profits, Great River Greening (GRG) and the Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA), are the project's joint sponsors. GRG is an environmental non-profit with a wide range of ecological expertise focusing on vegetation restoration and pollinator management. HAFA operates HAFA Farm, a 155-acre research and incubator farm that supports community farming, sustainable agriculture research, and has implemented a whole farm pollinator plan.

TH 52 bisects HAFA Farm, making it a natural location for a highway right-of-way pollinator project. In 2018, GRG received a \$100,000 grant from the General Mills Foundation to support a portfolio of GRG pollinator projects throughout Minnesota, including the TH 52 Highway Sponsorship effort. The Highway Sponsorship program director reports that pollinators are essential for the Minnesota agricultural sector, which is why it was a specific aim of the statute that enabled the Highway Sponsorship program.

The Highway Sponsorship Program is collaborating with the state's Adopt-A-Highway Program on the 2020-2021 Minnesota Litter Study. The study consists of a visible-litter count at 12 to 15

² FHWA, Order 5160.1a: "Policy on Sponsorship Acknowledgment and Agreements within the Highway Right-of-Way", April 2014 <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/legisregs/directives/orders/51601a.cfm>

sites throughout the state, online market research of residents' attitudes about litter, and analysis of the economic, environmental, and aesthetic costs and impacts of litter in the state. The last litter study was conducted in 1990. The Highway Sponsorship Program will use study results to identify future project needs and areas of interest.

Lessons Learned

One initial challenge was that the DOT is designed to work with local government agencies rather than private companies, developers, nonprofit organizations, and civic and philanthropic sector partners. The agency needed to adapt to working with non-governmental partners with different needs and expectations. The types of projects supported under this program require long-term partnerships, which can be challenging to establish. Furthermore, the long lead time associated with transportation projects can be an obstacle in forming partnerships with local communities because it can be difficult to coordinate partnership formation with funding availability.

Some projects take significant time and effort to come to fruition. MnDOT is currently trying to establish a partnership for a large-scale pollinator project but has not yet been able to identify the appropriate three or more partners necessary to sponsor such a complex project.

Regarding successes, the Highway Sponsorship represented an innovative use of MnDOT right of way that initiated a shift in agency culture related to maintenance activities. Furthermore, the program has sparked a shift in agency culture regarding the potential for engaging outside partners which has opened the door for future public-private partnerships and other innovative uses of MnDOT right-of-way.

Outcomes

The Highway Sponsorship program enables meaningful private sector and civic participation in a wide variety of highway beautification and environmental protection activities that were not previously possible. Though the enabling statute refers to "moderate revenue generation", revenue generation is not the primary goal of the program. Instead, the program focuses on using trunk highway right-of-way to generate aesthetic, environmental, social, and equity benefits as well as increased community engagement with highway aesthetics and beautification. The program is expected to eventually provide cost savings, but MnDOT does not currently monitor project budgets (which are assumed by the Sponsor) or track cost savings (e.g., landscaping and maintenance) that may occur due to the program. In many cases, the state would not otherwise perform these activities. For example, there is no budget for creating pollinator habitats along the right-of-way. Moreover, the long-term financial benefits of projects have yet to be realized because of the newness of the program. Projects implemented under this program may take years to develop and are designed to have long-term environmental benefits, which in turn will have economic and societal ripple effects.

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