

Wilmar Wye Rail Connection

Project Background

- MnDOT and its partners Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF), City of Willmar, Kandiyohi County and the Kandiyohi County and City of Willmar Economic Development Commission are adding a rail connection between two existing BNSF railway lines and modifying surrounding roadways to better move freight through the city of Willmar.
- The Willmar Rail Connector and Industrial Park Access Project known as the “Willmar Wye” reduce the number of train trips that cause lengthy traffic delays at at-grade rail crossings in Willmar while providing rail access to the Willmar Industrial Park to promote economic development
- The project will benefit a number of groups, including rail customers that receive or produce shipments; motorists, pedestrians and bicyclists that currently have to wait for trains on at-grade crossings; and the business community within the City of Willmar.

Public Engagement Challenge

- Negotiations between the Wye partners involved complicated tradeoffs and concessions that were difficult to communicate to the public.
- Concentrations of both minority and low-income populations exist within the project impact area.
- One of the central pieces of the city's concern stemmed from First Avenue West/Kandiyohi County Road 55 and whether there should be an at-grade crossing where the road would cross the new track.
- To mitigate impacts to businesses along First Avenue, including Quam Construction, PALS Inc. and Farm Service Elevator, First Avenue was routed south through the elevator to the re-routed US Hwy 12.

Public Engagement Tool

- Stakeholders including BNSF Railway, MnDOT, City of Willmar, Kandiyohi County and the local economic development council have been working in partnership to advance project development.
- A Public Engagement Plan was crafted early in the project development process, and public and stakeholder engagement activities were implemented throughout the process.
- The project public engagement process was designed to provide meaningful and interactive outreach opportunities for all stakeholders. It was intentionally inclusive and accessible to stakeholders and the public regardless of age, ethnicity, language, income or disability.

- Tactics included public outreach meetings/presentations and informal pop-up meetings and events in locations that serve interests of EJ communities, including the Willmar Public Library, the Kandiyohi County Farmers Market, churches, and mosques
- Project information and meeting materials were provided in alternative languages (Spanish and Somali) at public meetings and events and an offer to provide language interpreters at public events in meeting notices and invitations.

Key Takeaways

- The overarching goals for public engagement were clearly defined and included:
 - Build public support for the project through proactive and transparent public outreach
 - Inform and educate stakeholders and the public about the background and purpose of the project
 - Provide opportunities for interested parties to identify issues, concerns and priorities
- A key strategy was to engage community leaders to reach out to established neighborhood groups, community leaders and private organizations comprised of and connected to minority and low-income communities
- The coordination among all parties involved in the Willmar Wye serves as an example for other public-private partnership projects in the state.

Level of Engagement: Inform, Consult, Involve

- Community members and public officials were provided project information and opportunities to better understand the project and provide input on layout alternatives.
- Through the public engagement process, other community concerns were identified and addressed throughout the design phase and in the partnership agreement.

Caveat

- Partnerships require a great deal of patience. All parties need time and opportunity to review and approve decision points in project development.

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Keywords

- Public-Private Partnership; Environmental Justice, Community Outreach, Freight Rail