

# River Crossing Coalition Seeks Congressional Action on Bridge Project

*Supporters say a modern bridge over the St. Croix River is critical*

Advocates for a new bridge over the St. Croix River are forming a 2-state coalition and will take their message to Washington, D.C. later this year or in early 2011. They will work with federal legislators from Wisconsin and Minnesota and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) to exempt the river crossing from the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The bridge supporters cite two other project exemptions since the federal law was enacted.



*This photo simulation shows an aerial view of the King Plant looking west and illustrates the proposed St. Croix River Crossing between Oak Park Heights, MN and St. Joseph, WI.*

Wisconsin representation on the coalition's yet-to-be-formed board of directors includes county board chair Daryl Standafer, John Soderberg, chairman of the board, First National Community Bank, Kim Heinemann, president of the Hudson Area Chamber of Commerce, Russ Korpela, executive director of the New Richmond Area Chamber of Commerce, Bill Berndt, vice president, Riverwood Group, and Bill Rubin, executive director of St. Croix Economic Development Corp.

The coalition is filing articles of incorporation and expects to have by-laws in place so that the directors can meet and select a chair. A non-profit designation will be sought from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). A strong mission statement will help drive corporate support for the advocacy effort.

For decades, transportation officials have struggled with a new river crossing over the St. Croix. A new crossing would take a Lift Bridge in Stillwater, Minnesota out of service. The Lift Bridge, opened in 1931, is at the end of its economic life and is structurally deficient.

The St. Croix River has enjoyed a protected status since 1972 when it was designated as a wild and scenic river for its outstanding scenic, recreational, and geological values. The protected status was sustained on October 15, 2010 when the National Park Service (NPS) determined from its Section 7(a) evaluation of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act that the proposed river crossing project would have direct and adverse effects that cannot be avoided or eliminated. Under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, the NPS cannot approve a project if its direct and adverse effects cannot be avoided or eliminated.

In a written communique to the FHWA, the midwest regional director of the NPS said constructing a bridge — where there was not one previously — would fundamentally change the scenic qualities that existed when the St. Croix was designated a national wild and scenic river.

To offset the potential impacts of a new river crossing, a mitigation package had been recommended by a stakeholder group comprised of local, state, and federal officials. The stakeholders were convened from 2003-2006 to find a consensus solution to replacing the Lift Bridge with a new river crossing.



*The Lift Bridge connecting St. Joseph, Wisconsin in St. Croix County with Stillwater, Minnesota was built in 1931. Traffic congestion, safety problems, and delays caused by the operation of the lift mechanism have spurred the discussion of a new river crossing. The estimated (congestion free) vehicle capacity of the Lift Bridge is 11,200 vehicles a day. A 2002 traffic study estimated 16,300 vehicles a day cross the bridge and this volume can exceed 19,000 on a summer weekend.*

Throughout the 2003-2006 stakeholder process, there were several opportunities for public comment. St. Croix EDC sent letters supporting the project. The EDC's consistent message included the project's regional significance and enhancements to safety and mobility.

The same Section 7(a) language that enabled the NPS to conduct its evaluation also allows Congress to act so that projects like the river crossing to move forward. Congressional representatives from Wisconsin and Minnesota are now exploring legislation for this to occur.

Funding for the new project would come the FHWA, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. For more information about the St. Croix River Crossing project, go to [www.dot.state.mn.us/metro/projects/stcroix](http://www.dot.state.mn.us/metro/projects/stcroix).