Executive Summary

Tourism is a booming industry in the modern world. It not only helps current local community’s economy, but also provides a sustainable way for future development.

In Minnesota, tourism is a $13 billion industry, and sales are more than $35 million a day. Travel/tourism in Minnesota generates 250,000 full- and part-time jobs in 2013 – up from $12.5 billion and 245,000 jobs in 2012, 11% of total private sector employment and almost $4.5 billion in wages. $840 million is generated in state sales taxes that make 17% of state sales tax revenues and spending during Minnesota’s 69 million annual person-trips (including overnight and day trips) is distributed throughout the economy. There is a great growth in the tourism industry. Sales at leisure and hospitality business grew 49% from 2003 to 2013, which is from $8.7 billion to $13 billion, including 4% annual growth for 2013. Tourism is so important that is worth every local community and the entire state put great focus on this industry.

The Highway 75 King of Tails Scenic Byway has significant natural, historic, and cultural values. How to reorganize all the resources along the King of Trails and put them together in order to maximize its benefits to those local communities become an important topic.

The purpose of completing this Hwy 75 King of Trails Strategic Marketing Plan is to guide the coalition of communities in its decision making over following years and to ensure the viability of the program. The key steps in the development of the plan included:

- Field surveys and interviews of community leaders and stakeholders, including the Minnesota Tourism Division;
- A planning session with community leaders and staff and MNDOT;
• An inclusive plan review process involving the aforementioned stakeholders.

This plan includes an overview of the history of Hwy 75 King of Trails, an analysis of the existing situation, and a call to action with vision, mission, goals, objectives, and strategies designed to provide a plan for the future.

Background

The International Historic Highway 75 “King of Trails” Coalition formed in 1996 after the review of historical information showing the rich history of the route. Since 1917 the corridor was called “The King of Trails” because it traversed across the United States from Galveston, Texas to Winnipeg, Canada. In 2001 the Coalition worked with the Minnesota Legislature to legislatively designate Highway 75 as the “Historic King of Trails”. Volunteers from over 30 communities formed the Coalition for the purpose of marketing the Highway 75 corridor. The Coalition consists of counties, cities, chambers, EDAs, businesses and individual members. The mission of the Highway 75 Coalition is to develop community partnerships, to increase cultural and environmental awareness, and to promote attractions and opportunities that are available along Highway 75, the Historic King of Trails, and its surrounding corridor.

The Coalition meets on an annual basis to conduct business and has divided the corridor into three large regions. The regions are: Region 1-Winnipeg to Norman County, Region 2 - Norman County to Big Stone County and Region 3- Big Stone County to Iowa Border. As Regions the Coalition can more easily address the needs of the large geographic area. They have an annual membership drive, a brochure, website (www.highway75.com) and a 414 mile long “Fall Marketplace” where flea marketers, garage sales and other events are hosted by communities along the route.
The King of Trails is further divided into 5 sections to provide travelers information. King of Trails Route traverses four MNDOT Districts 2, 4, 7 and 8 and four Regional Development Organization areas.

The challenge

The Hwy 75 King of Trails can be designated as a scenic byway, which are paved roads with an all-weather surface suitable for year-round auto travel, or a scenic backway, which are unpaved or loose-surface roads that lack all-weather surface features. To qualify for designation, the King of Trails must possess strong characteristics which fall under at least one or more of the following intrinsic qualities:

- **Scenic Quality** is the heightened visual experience from the view of natural and manmade elements of the visual environment. The characteristics of the landscape are strikingly distinct and offer a pleasing and most memorable visual experience.
- **Natural Quality** applies to those features in the visual environment that are in a relatively undisturbed area. These features may include geological formations, fossils, landforms, water bodies, vegetation, and wildlife. There may be evidence of human activity, but the natural features reveal minimal disturbances.
- **Historic Quality** encompasses legacies of the past that are distinctly associated with natural or manmade elements of the landscape that are of such historic significance they educate the viewer and stir an appreciation for the past. The historic elements may include buildings, settlement patterns, and other examples of human activity.
- **Cultural Quality** is evidence and expressions of the customs or traditions of a distinct group of people. Currently practiced cultural features include, but are not limited to, crafts, music, dance, rituals, festivals, speech, food, special events, and vernacular architecture.
- Archeological Quality involves physical evidence of historic or prehistoric human life or activity that is visible and capable of being inventoried and interpreted.
- Recreational Quality involves outdoor recreational activities directly associated with and dependent upon the other intrinsic qualities. Active and passive recreational opportunities may include downhill skiing, rafting, boating, fishing, and hiking. Driving the highway itself may qualify as a pleasurable recreational experience.

**Situation Analysis**

**Strengths and Challenges**

**Strengths of the Hwy 75 King of Trails**

In the survey and interview, local communities were asked to identify the several strengths of the existing coalition. The most reported strengths included:

- Connection – The advantageous location of the highway, connecting Canada and run through entire Minnesota; the value of the intrinsic
qualities represented by the highway; and the impact of highway on local economic development and tourism.

- **Promotion/Marketing** – The signage by the King of Trails Coalition for the Highway 75; the printed brochure and website; and cooperative marketing opportunities.

- **Potential Funding** – The annual fee from each community and the potential funding from Explore Minnesota provide an opportunity for coalition funding.

- **Application Process and Standards** – The established process to designate and maintain Hwy 75 status, which includes development of corridor management plans.

Areas for Improvement of the Hwy 75 King of Trails

Local communities also reported their perceptions on the areas of greatest possible improvement for the Hwy 75 King of Trails. The areas receiving the most suggestions for improvement included:

- **Promotion & Marketing** – Incorporation of a more diverse mix of marketing, such as digital (e.g., websites, social media), signage, billboards, and indoor displays; better branding of the whole highway; and more cooperative marketing among each local communities and with partners such as the Explore Minnesota Organization.

- **Funding** – Return to dedicated community and small business annual fee for highway and expansion of other support.

- **Highway Development** – Expansion of local amenities along Hwy 75 King of Trails; increased local involvement; and better collaboration locally and regionally.

- **Communication/Cooperation Enhancement** – Regular member and state byway meetings and development of program objectives.

- **Organization Standards** – Better quality control; leadership development to support organizational sustainability.

- **Event Creation** – More evenly distributed events along the highway.
Trends Impacting the Hwy 75 King of Trails

There are some trends or opportunities that have the greatest potential to impact the future of the Hwy 75 King of Trails. The most reported trends included:

- Changes in Minnesota – Increased state population and visitation; increased transportation costs; increased traffic; and changing demographics and travel patterns.
- Increase in Activities – Interest in diverse activities, such as birding, fishing, canoeing, extreme tourism, agritourism, and bus tours.
- Promotion – Increased use of mobile technology.
- Organization Development – Decrease in volunteerism and leadership succession for coalition; involvement of local businesses in providing amenities.
- Byway Creation – Potential extension of existing scenic byways or creation of new byways.

A Call to Action for the future of the Hwy 75 King of Trails

The Hwy 75 King of Trails is a significant component of tourism industry. A strong economy, growing population, and increased national and
international interest in Minnesota provide the opportunity to identify and prioritize opportunities to advance the Hwy 75 King of Trails into the future.

Mission

Develop community partnerships to increase cultural and environmental awareness and promote attractions and opportunities along Highway 75 and surrounding corridor.

Vision

- Catalyst for improving social and cultural benefits for local people and visitors
- Increased use and knowledge of location attraction
- Economic benefit for communities
- Expand or start new business
- Recognition of attractions and communities
- Increased community pride
- Tourism as economic generator
- New resident attractiveness
- Strong links between communities
- More traffic on corridor

Goals and Objectives

Awareness and Brand Development
- Maximize the impact of available marketing funds for the Hwy 75 King of Trails.
- Coordinate the King of Trails’ statewide marketing efforts with local communities, tourism organization, and other partners.

Advocacy and Collaboration
- Encourage advocates to work to secure sustainable local and state funding for Hwy 75 King of Trails and for re-grant opportunities to the highway.
- Communicate opportunities about potential funding from statewide or local business for the Hwy 75 King of Trails.
- Establish positive relationships with local and regional partners to advance the Hwy 75 King of Trails.

Support
- Offer marketing opportunities for local communities to attract more tourists.
- Provide technical assistance to local communities, business, and organizations.
- Communicate opportunities and information to communities along the Hwy 75 King of Trails.

Selected Marketing Strategy

Prioritized Strategies

In the summer 2015 research stage, an extensive list of possible strategies that could be utilized to accomplish the established goals and associated objectives for the Hwy75 King of Trails is identified. Recognizing the Hwy 75 King of Trails has limited resources, these possible
strategies priority tasks to be completed for the following year based on available resources. The prioritized list of these strategies is outlined below.

Goal – Awareness and Brand Development
- Maximize the impact of available marketing funds for the Hwy 75 King of Trails.
  - Continue publication of the print brochure and explore prospects for broader distribution.
  - Explore opportunities to update and expand the existing website or create a new website specifically for the Hwy 75 King of Trails.
  - Participate and/or provide a presence for the Hwy 75 King of Trails at trade shows, including the Minnesota Travel Industry Conference and regional tourism conferences.
  - Develop a plan for highlighting the King of Trails on the Explore Minnesota, Minnesota Recreation & Park Association, and other tourism web pages.
  - Explore opportunities to increase the use of mobile technology.
  - Identify opportunities for implementation of additional social media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Vine, or guest blogging.
- Coordinate the King of Trails’ statewide marketing efforts with local communities, tourism organization, and other partners.
  - Schedule regular meetings with other state and federal agencies (Minnesota Department of Transportation, Explore Minnesota, Minnesota Historical Society, Minnesota DNR, Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and U.S. Forest Service) to exchange information and discuss highway impacts, marketing strategies, and joint opportunities.
  - Coordinate discussion among five divisions regarding development of day trip itineraries for marketing purposes.
Goal – Advocacy and Collaboration

- Encourage advocates to work to secure sustainable local and state funding for Hwy 75 King of Trails and for re-grant opportunities to the highway.
  - Identify potential partners to secure grants from available local and state funding sources to support the Hwy 75 King of Trails.
  - Support coalition efforts to secure funding, as permissible.
- Communicate opportunities about potential funding from statewide or local business for the Hwy 75 King of Trails.
  - Identify potential business funders and specific funding opportunities for each.
  - Support byway efforts to contact identified businesses.
- Establish positive relationships with local and regional partners to advance the Hwy 75 King of Trails.
  - Develop a fact sheet with talking points on the value and impact of the Hwy 75 King of Trails for use by coalition and other partners in meetings with key stakeholders (e.g., local officials, local businesses, state agency officials, etc.).
  - Work with local communities to establish/keep a King of Trails day or week (e.g. Market day).
  - Coordinate development of an annual outreach strategy and timeline for the Hwy 75 King of Trails contacts with key stakeholders.

Goal – Support

- Offer marketing opportunities for local communities to attract more tourists.
  - Continue to hold member conference annually and secure participation commitment from each community.
  - Offer training on topics such as implementing social media as a marketing strategy, recruiting and retaining members, and developing sustainable organizations.
- Provide technical assistance to local communities, business, and organizations.
Develop a system of regular review of the Hwy 75 King of Trails by coalition staff and objective observers to provide feedback on areas for improvement (e.g., signage, navigability, amenities, attractions, etc.).

Explore the possibility of partnering with the University of Minnesota to complete another conditions assessment and improvement report for Hwy 75 King of Trails.

Communicate with each member at least once a month in vary ways (e.g., phone call, visit, online, video conference, etc.).

- Communicate opportunities and information to communities along the Hwy 75 King of Trails.
  - Continue to create an annual report summarizing the accomplishments of the coalition and the Highway 75 King of Trails and distribute as appropriate.
  - Establish a consistent method of providing information to members, such as an electronic newsletter, on topics including marketing efforts, partner news, and Hwy 75 King of Trails accomplishments.
  - Encourage the regular submission of local events and activities to the coalition and Explore Minnesota.

Marketing Plan

One of the strategic goals of the Hwy 75 King of Trails Strategic Plan is “Awareness and Brand Development,” which makes establishing an annual marketing plan essential. To be effective, the marketing plan must be realistic based on available funding.

Current Marketing Budget

With the existing marketing funds for the Hwy 75 King of Trails, the primary marketing tool has been the printed brochure. This is distributed along local tourism centers and at local attractions and businesses along the highway, including convention and visitors bureaus. Based on the high value placed on the brochure through the strategic planning process, the brochure should continue to be the top priority.
With the remaining marketing budget, working with the Explore Minnesota to utilize cooperative advertising opportunities would be the best option to maximize the impact of these dollars. To guide the selection of the best advertising options, the Hwy 75 King of Trails should form a three to five person marketing advisory committee made up of coalition members. These strategies should be evaluated annually and updated based on the next year’s funding.

Future Marketing Opportunities

Should additional marketing funds become available, the following framework offers an outline for developing a marketing plan depending on a final budget.

Review Existing & Potential Efforts

- Compile summary of annual marketing undertaken by other entities (e.g., Explore Minnesota)
- Evaluate program marketing expenditures over the last budget cycles to determine which strategies to continue and which to eliminate based on reach and impact
- Identify target audiences on which to focus future marketing efforts, such as:
  - Cultural and heritage travelers
  - Adventure travelers
  - Nature recreation travellers
  - Birding
  - Camper
  - Senior
  - Family and friends
  - Business travellers
  - International travellers (Canadians)
- Research costs associated with new marketing options identified in the strategic plan, including:
  - Development of a new website
Social media strategy for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and/or Vine
Mobile technology such as Talking Trail
Promotion of Hwy 75 King of Trails day or week (Market Day)
Video development for Hwy 75 King of Trails
Billboard strategy
Trade show participation

Establish Budget & Plan

- Build a budget for the upcoming fiscal year based on continuing successful strategies and adding new strategies as financially viable
- Create an editorial calendar to accompany budget based on key amenities and events for byways (i.e., topic, event date, publication date, author, media outlet)
- Determine successful evaluation methods for all marketing efforts

Ongoing

- Develop brand
  - Regularly review existing collateral (e.g., state website, printed brochure, Explore Minnesota website, byway websites, social media accounts, etc.) for consistency and accuracy
  - Maintain central photo and amenities database for byways
  - Integrate “Legendary” theme
  - Incorporate marketing focus into all program efforts (e.g., Market Day, annual report, etc.)
- Strengthen relationships
  - Maintain list of outlets in order to distribute collateral and information
  - Meet regularly with marketing partners to coordinate efforts
  - Build relationship with media and tourism-related organizations
- Identify potential sources of new funding for marketing

The Hwy 75 King of Trails can be effective by applying its resources and energy to accomplish specific action items to achieve its goals and
objectives. At the conclusion of each year, the organization can measure success in accomplishing its implementation, and if achievements have been made, new items can be added to the next year’s plan. Rather than a random approach on many items that achieves little given available funding, this process allows for the accomplishment of a few priority items. Future implementation plans are contingent on funding appropriated to support the Hwy 75 King of Trails.

Other Recommendations

Upon designation, the local communities are responsible for maintaining the Hwy 75 King of Trails’ status through the following requirements:

- Conduct/attend coalition meetings, at minimum, one time per year.
- Properly install and maintain King of Trails signs along Hwy 75.
- Develop and distribute where appropriate at minimum one marketing piece.
- Update partner-access website information for local attractions and events as requested via the Hwy 75 King of Trails website and Explore Minnesota.
- Plan and coordinate with the Hwy 75 King of Trails Coalition to conduct annual report per year.
Submit an annual report, per the request of and to the state byway coordinator, regarding scenic byway/backway economic impacts, enhancements, results of marketing efforts, and corridor management plan implementation.