

Northern Minnesota/Northwest Wisconsin Regional Freight Planning

Regional Models of Cooperation Case Study Series

Planning Bi-State Freight Movements in the Duluth-Superior Region

Moving freight efficiently across state borders can be challenging, especially when trucks face different weight restrictions on either side of the boundary. The Duluth-Superior Metropolitan Interstate Council (MIC), a bi-state MPO on the Minnesota-Wisconsin border, works to address this challenge by collaborating with the Minnesota and Wisconsin Departments of Transportation (MnDOT and WisDOT) as well as other regional agencies and freight operators to create shared freight plans for the region.

Motivation for Establishing the Collaboration

Freight movements play a significant economic role in the Duluth-Superior region, due both to the existence of paper mills in Northern Minnesota that require lumber from throughout the bi-state area, and to shipping and trucking activities associated with the Port of Duluth-Superior, the largest port on the Great Lakes. The Port of Duluth-Superior directly accounts for about 3,000 jobs and handles approximately 40 million tons of freight each year, making the Duluth-Superior area the hub of freight activities in the region. To maximize these resources, MIC often works with MnDOT and WisDOT to gain data to support its planning efforts and gain a better understanding of the freight movements and needs on both sides of the state border. Hence, when MnDOT approached MIC about creating a regional freight plan, MIC immediately sought to include its Wisconsin partners as well. MIC's initiative turned MnDOT's proposed plan into the first Northern Minnesota/Northwest Wisconsin [Regional Freight Plan](#) and led to years of active bi-state collaboration on freight work in the region.



Image of freight train and motor carriers serving the Port of Duluth-Superior. (Photo courtesy of MIC)

Collaboration Structure

MIC staff are employed by the Arrowhead Regional Development Commission (ARDC) in Duluth, Minnesota and the Northwest Regional Planning Commission (NWRPC) in Spooner, Wisconsin, which created MIC through a joint agreement in 1975. While the Minnesota area of MIC's planning jurisdiction is larger than its Wisconsin side, the agencies agreed to elect nine members from each state to staff the MIC Policy Board, which oversees the MPO's main decisions, goals, and objectives. The Policy Board meets monthly and includes representatives from three cities and St. Louis County in Minnesota, the City of Superior and Douglas County in Wisconsin, and suburban townships in both states.

MIC also includes a transportation advisory committee (TAC), a bicycle and pedestrian advisory committee (BPAC), and a harbor technical advisory committee (HTAC). HTAC, which focuses in part on the Port of Duluth-Superior and thus contributes to many of MIC's freight planning initiatives, meets quarterly and includes representatives from the Cities of Duluth and Superior; St. Louis and Douglas Counties; the Duluth Seaway Port Authority; the Minnesota and Wisconsin DOTs and Departments of Natural Resources; the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Coast Guard Marine Safety Unit, and Fish and Wildlife Service; as well as several regional agencies,



three citizen groups, and multiple industry sectors such as coal, grain, and ore. HTAC is one of the most active and diverse harbor groups in the country and provides a valuable network of relationships to guide MIC's bi-state freight planning.

MIC and MnDOT acted as equal partners in creating the 2009 Regional Freight Plan. While MnDOT held the contract with the project consultant, MIC used its relationships with agencies and interest groups on both sides of the border to facilitate the public involvement process. MIC also contributed funding, led efforts to include WisDOT on the Steering Committee, and helped coordinate monthly meetings for a technical team, which examined details and assumptions of the partners' analyses and models, and a policy team, which examined the plans' practical implications and recommendations. In addition to participating on the Steering Committee, WisDOT contributed data and funding to help with the plan. The Duluth Seaway Port Authority and the University of Wisconsin-Superior's Transportation Logistics Program also provided research and support.

Collaboration Accomplishments

The 2009 Regional Freight Plan cemented freight improvements as a priority for the region. Since the plan's publication, MIC helped the Duluth Seaway Port Authority win a \$10 million TIGER grant to expedite cargo loading and unloading in the port by renovating an old dock and connecting it to existing roads and rail infrastructure. MIC also began designating a fixed amount in its budget for freight planning to address issues as they arise during the year. Moreover, the collaborative planning process strengthened MIC's relationships with the freight community, which has allowed MIC to maximize its government partners' renewed commitment to improving freight movements in the region.

MIC's work to sustain a bi-state focus on freight improvements also led to recent efforts to address conflicts created by each state allowing higher weight limits for forest products than is allowed on the Interstate Highway System. This disparity has caused trucks destined for a Cloquet, Minnesota paper mill to use local roads instead of Interstate 35. MIC recently initiated the Northwest Douglas County Freight Movement Study to examine freight movements in northwest Wisconsin, paying special attention to forest products movements. In related work, MIC staff has engaged U.S. Congressional staff to seek an exemption for I-35 so that trucks currently driving on the brick-lined roads in Duluth's central business district and other area roads can use the Interstate.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

As a small MPO, MIC often lacks funding to collect detailed data on freight movements, which makes conducting analysis for supporting its regional freight plans a challenge. To address this, MIC partners with universities, MnDOT, and WisDOT, which allows them to pool resources to collect and share this data. Staff turnover in the State DOTs occasionally creates a problem for MIC's bi-state freight work because the MPO relies on its relationships with State DOT staff to secure freight data. MIC continues to address this issue by regularly communicating with MnDOT and WisDOT staff about the Duluth-Superior freight system and its needs.

The proprietary nature of data from private freight companies also makes the collection of sufficient information difficult. Many companies do not want to disclose data about their movements for fear of losing a competitive advantage. MIC has worked to establish trust with these companies and communicate the benefits of freight data sharing, such as the ability to more accurately understand freight patterns and problems and, in turn, create plans that allow more efficient freight movements that can better address the companies' needs.



MIC leverages its role as a bi-state MPO to promote collaborative freight planning with regional, state, and private transportation entities in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Its work has enabled cross-border initiatives that increase the efficiency of freight movements in a region of shared economic importance.

