

D5
Financial Strategies

EMPHASIZING FLEXIBILITY AND RESPONSIVENESS AS THE VALUE PROPOSITION OF THE
SMALL- AND MEDIUM-SIZED MPO

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The 2015/2016 rehabilitation of five miles of State Highway 23 in Duluth, Minnesota was shaped by an extensive, yet accelerated planning process that involved a great deal of participation among multiple partners and stakeholders within a 12 month period. Because of limited planning staff at MnDOT District 1, the Metropolitan Interstate Council (MIC) was invited to play an important role in enhancing the district's outreach and planning effort for the project. This request did not come with much advance notice, however, and the work needed to be done in six months. It was the flexible structure of the MIC's work program that allowed MPO staff to respond nimbly to the unexpected request and the tight timeline laid out by the MnDOT district.

The MPO's involvement in the planning for the Highway 23 project created additional planning and outreach capacity for District 1. MIC staff performed both technical analyses and stakeholder outreach activities. In addition to the input from a variety of community stakeholders, the extra effort afforded more access and input to different professionals from multiple departments at the City of Duluth – the other principal stakeholder with respect to the roadway. All the extra involvement produced an environment in which very specific low-cost, "micro-scale" improvements could be identified, while broader, big-picture concepts could also be brought up and discussed with MnDOT officials, who would likely not have entertained them otherwise.

The collection and discussion of ideas subsequently allowed the City of Duluth's Business and Economic Development department to respond to the unexpected but timely announcement of a competitive Corridor Investment Management Strategy (CIMS) grant made available through MnDOT's Central Office in St. Paul, MN. Again, MIC staff was able to shift priorities to lend the city some technical expertise in putting together a grant proposal that was ultimately successful in securing \$3,400,000 of additional enhancements to the district's Highway 23 project. This injection of funds allowed the Highway 23 project to be reshaped to include more safety and multi-modal elements that could not otherwise be accommodated in the district's original budget and scope for the project. This outcome underscores the importance of a cross-collaboration among public entities that goes beyond merely coordinating planning to also include the sharing of resources and the expanding of staffing capacity for regional partners at critical times.

While the MIC's approach may not be applicable to every small- or medium-sized MPO, there are several lessons learned that may help the personnel of other MPOs begin to rethink how they can create added value among the efforts of their regional partners and how they might better communicate their value proposition to those partners. In an era of constrained public finances, this approach may be the new critical strategy for shared regional success, and as the MIC's experience shows, the MPO can be a key ingredient to that success.

The tools of the trade that will be showcased in this presentation are 1) how the MIC's unified work program (UWP) was structured to allow for responsive flexibility, 2) the stakeholder outreach strategy that was used to achieve meaningful engagement in a constrained timeframe; and 3) a suggested framework for how to market the MPO's value proposition as a responsive 'staff capacity building' resource to regional stakeholders.