



P.O. Box 111, Duluth, MN 55801

TEL: (218) 740-3175 FAX: (218) 740-3179 EMAIL info@MnResponsibleRec.org

WEBSITE: www.MnResponsibleRec.org

October 8, 2004

Bryan Anderson, Planner
221 West First Street
Duluth, MN 55802

Dear Bryan;

Please accept the following comments on the ARDC *Hermantown Snowmobile Trail* plan.

MRR and the “Missing Link” State Snowmobile Trail: For the past eight years Duluth area residents have been expressing their opposition to development of a crosstown “missing link” state snowmobile through our metropolitan community. In 1996 Minnesotans for Responsible Recreation successfully gave a voice to this opposition by bringing Duluth citizens west to east together with the city council to pass an ordinance that such a trail would not be built. (In Duluth’s footsteps in the weeks following, the Anchorage, Alaska City Assembly also said, “No thank you.” to a cross-town snowmobile trail in their community.) In 1999, MRR responded to creation of a DNR pilot program to purchase permanent easements on private property that rewards bad behavior with permanent access. MRR acted as a resource to property owners in Hermantown and Rice Lake Township regarding the unwanted effects of such a permanent encumbrance on their property. (Many who were already beyond their tolerance for the noise, bad behavior and property damage chose to withdraw the temporary easements they had already granted.) MRR has testified at the Minnesota legislature repeatedly over the past six years in opposition to providing what is to date \$.5 million in public funds for easement acquisition for the Duluth area missing link state snowmobile trail. MRR is well identified in the Duluth area and state- and nation-wide as a key stakeholder organization with a long and intimate history and our own unique expertise regarding this proposed trail.

High ARDC Standards and Outcomes Unmet, Planning Process Undone: While MRR continues to oppose this unwanted trail, we have over the past year supported involvement of the Arrowhead Regional Development Commission. ARDC has a well-deserved reputation in the region for bringing divergent stakeholders together to solve community problems. The North Shore corridor plan for Highway 61, regional and metropolitan bicycle and pedestrian and long-range transportation plans, and the many comprehensive and human service plans across an eight county region are each part of an outstanding ARDC legacy of contributions to the health and wellbeing of our region. ARDC is known for engaging the disenfranchised and for generating public discussion and debate about important community issues. Sadly, for the people of the Duluth area and for public discussion and debate in general this great tradition is simply not manifest in the current ARDC *Hermantown Snowmobile Trail Plan*.

The hoped-for planning process of bringing all stakeholders together along with all information at hand to address community issues and concerns has simply not taken place regarding the proposed *Hermantown Missing Link State Snowmobile Trail*. Despite repeated verbal and written pleas over the past year that MRR and property owners be included in development of the current “plan” these stakeholders have been entirely and systematically excluded. In rejecting these stakeholders, the resources they have offered and whole bodies of information in development of the current “plan”, ARDC has entirely failed to identify even the most salient of longstanding problems and concerns regarding a proposed “missing link” state snowmobile trail. Not a plan at all but a promotional document for the exclusive use of the Hermantown Over the Hill Night Riders Permanent Snowmobile Trail Committee, ARDC has done a great disservice to longstanding public discourse and to Duluth metropolitan area residents who have for eight years been saying “No thank you.” to this unwanted state snowmobile trail.

Uncharacteristic ARDC Whitewash Brings Darkness Instead of Light While the current *Hermantown Snowmobile Trail Plan* cites from cover to cover the fact that property owners are withdrawing their temporary snowmobile easements, ARDC does not identify the reasons these easements are being withdrawn. By failing to engage private property owners and the well-documented public record of their concerns, ARDC has succeeded in sweeping under the rug what it should be bringing to light. While failing to provide a narrative of extensive property owner concerns, the “plan” finds plenty of room to whine about *inconvenience* to the local snowmobile club in having to find new rights-of-way through the town as a result of their ongoing evictions. Most disturbing, while the “plan” does not acknowledge landowner concerns, a companion draft *landowner guide* to permanent easements states “problems are very few” with snowmobile trail easements. Nothing could be further from the truth. While it is bad enough that ARDC has failed to engage these stakeholders, current documents now declare these stakeholders and their concerns as non-entities and non-existent. Many concerned citizens already challenged by shyness and even fear in voicing their concerns and opposition to the proposed state snowmobile trail have been silenced. ARDC’s current plan tells these stakeholders and the world that their concerns are unimportant, unreal and insignificant. One outcome of this “plan” is that disenfranchised property owners will become only more invisible and isolated. In the words of one landowner “property owners should be treated with respect not disdain”.

At a time when Minnesotans and Americans are demanding more openness and intellectual honesty from public institutions ARDC has participated in a great whitewashing of a significant problem facing our community. Instead of bringing light and openness to the returning question of a “missing link” state snowmobile trail in our community, the current ARDC plan has had the effect of reducing and dismissing what for eight years has been vigorous public involvement. The dampening effect of ARDC’s completed “process” and draft “plan” is in itself a sad event in our community. To quote staff at the October 6 and final permanent snowmobile trail committee meeting “It will be the committee that makes the decision about where the trail will go.” It should be ARDC’s function to make decision-making more inclusive not more exclusive. More troubling still is the lack of acknowledgement by ARDC staff at the above meeting that at least one property owner had recently withdrawn permission for the trail, effectively making several route alternatives discussed at the meeting no longer feasible. Sadly, the withholding from discussion of critical information, the entire process and current documents are the uncharacteristic negative outcomes of this ARDC involvement.

MRR is waiting for ARDC to fulfill its stated commitment to “providing local units of government and citizen groups a means to work cooperatively in identifying needs, solving problems and fostering local leadership”. MRR calls on ARDC to put the current plan aside and to reassure the public with announcement that ARDC will immediately commence the following:

- Meet with all identified stakeholders and list issues related to the ongoing withdrawal of temporary easements by property owners and the continued interest by some to have a missing link snowmobile trail
- Utilize a 2003 Legislative Audit of the DNR’s snowmobile program in investigating why so many property owners who have never given permission to use their land have the trail on their property and why portions of the trail are being funded and bulldozed without this written permission as required by state rules
- “Blind survey” and conduct interviews with property owners along existing temporary route (Alternative A), adjacent to this route and area residents
- Engage all stakeholders through above and other outreach in a problem-solving process to creatively and proactively address identified problems
- Utilize all information available including data obtained from property owners, studies and research about the unwanted effects of snowmobiling, examples of effective solutions from other communities, public record of the history of the proposed state snowmobile trail
- Be an objective ombudsman for the public good in the great tradition of ARDC in helping the community address issues surrounding a proposed “missing link” state snowmobile trail

MRR is committed to supporting ARDC’s role as a facilitator of the above steps. As we have repeatedly offered to various ARDC staff over the past year, MRR commits the resources of our organization to identifying and engaging stakeholders, gathering information, identifying and defining problems and brainstorming solutions to the question of a proposed cross-town missing link state snowmobile trail.

Once ARDC has completed the process it is respected for, MRR will also work to engage members, property owners and others in the community to comment on any plan generated by such a process. Because of the basic defects in the current documents, MRR has not actively engaged these stakeholders in commenting on the current plan. Instead we are currently working to be a resource to property owners and area residents and to unite the voice of disenfranchised stakeholders.

MRR continues to have hope that ARDC will rise to the current challenge. Open access to public and private land and public funds has created a “culture of entitlement” among snowmobile clubs and many snowmobile riders that exerts a unique pressure on public agencies. Comments recently made by Permanent Snowmobile Trail Committee members such as “We have a right to recreate” and “If a person spends \$8000 –10,000 on a snowmobile they should have a place to ride it.” are expressions of this culture of entitlement.

The political-economics of snowmobiling has over the past 30 years created in our DNR and apparently our regional planning agencies a “culture of obligation” to meet the self-centered needs and wants of snowmobilers, sometimes, as with the current “planning” document, at the expense of other needs and wants in our communities.

MRR calls on ARDC to declare your freedom from these obligations and recommit to an inclusive, open, and complete planning process to inspect the question of a missing link state snowmobile trail. We seek a partnership in which real problems are solved with a potential win-win for property owners and snowmobilers alike. To solve such problems would be a contribution to both our immediate community and the people of our region and nation as well. MRR supports ARDC in using this opportunity to make such a contribution.

MRR will be calling on DNR Commissioner Gene Merriam to consider re-engaging ARDC in a new contract to complete the planning process described above. With MRR's participation in developing the workplan and implementing the steps above we are committed to working with ARDC and the DNR.

Please contact me anytime at 740-3175 to discuss an ARDC/MRR partnership in working through the above planning steps. MRR members and property owners are ready to meet with you at any time.

Sincerely,

Jeff Brown
Executive Director

c. John Chell, Executive Director, ARDC
Commissioner Gene Merriam, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
Mayor Herb Bergson
Representative Alice Hausman, Minnesota House of Representatives
Representative Mike Jaros, Minnesota House of Representatives
Commissioner Bill Kron, St. Louis County Board of Commissioners

