
Community, Natural Resource and Economic Development

Superior Days: A Grass Roots Approach to Community Development

Situation

Superior Days is a citizen lobbying effort that takes place annually in February or March, during the Wisconsin state legislative session. The event was developed in response to the impact of economic factors and a sense of geographical and political isolation felt by residents of the city of Superior and Douglas County, who live more than 300 miles from the state capital in Madison.

During the economic downturn associated with the 1981-82 national recession Superior lost 20 percent of its local employment base, including 40 percent of its manufacturing employment base. The recession also lasted longer locally than at the state or national level. As a result of the continued economic slump, a number of critical needs were not being met in northern Wisconsin communities and needed improvements to the region's aquaculture and transportation systems and the University of Wisconsin-Superior were beyond the capacity of local government.

Response

A 1985 community economic analysis sponsored by the University of Wisconsin-Extension brought together a group of interested citizens and community leaders to analyze the local economy and plan for the future. Out of a list of recommendations for action, the group identified its top priority to be to "hold potential votes hostage for economic development." It was the group consensus that the time had come to change the area's history of delivering elections along party lines for little return. This became the impetus to action and change.

Through a series of formal and informal meetings, residents discussed ways they could assert themselves politically on behalf of the Superior and Douglas County area. Suggestions included hiring a professional lobbyist or bringing the state legislature to northwest Wisconsin to learn firsthand what the area has to offer. In a combination of these two ideas, residents decided to take their message directly and personally to the legislature and state government. The Superior Days effort was launched.

What began in 1986 as an ad hoc attempt to establish communication linkages between northwest Wisconsin and state government—particularly in relation to economic recovery and growth—evolved into a major annual event and a model of participatory democracy. For 20 consecutive years, a diverse group of Superior, Douglas County and northwest Wisconsin residents, numbering greater than 200 adults and youth, have teamed up to build upon and enhance the area's relationship with state government.

Superior Days participants range from students to retirees with backgrounds in both the private and public sectors. No single group dominates and everyone has an equal voice. Through committees, participants work on issue identification and lobbying and prepare for hospitality and reception.

The issues presented to legislators and state departments are identified based on three criteria: 1) the issue is unique to northwest Wisconsin; 2) resolution of the issue requires resources that exceed local capacity; and 3) the issue has communitywide consensus. The issues are well researched and utilize the expertise and research of UW-Extension state specialists and CRD educators from participating counties. Participants then have the opportunity to talk with state assembly and state senate representatives, state agency leadership and the Governor.

Leadership to facilitate the entire event, including coordination, planning and participant training, is provided by the Douglas County UW-Extension Community Resource Development (CRD) Educator.

Financial resources necessary to support Superior Days are generated through aggressive fundraising efforts. Participants in Superior Days are directly involved in planning, organizing, implementing and evaluating all aspects of the event, thus empowering individual citizens to take an active role in public policy development and establishing partnerships to address the needs of northern Wisconsin communities.

Outcomes

Based on the feedback from Superior Days participants, significant long-term outcomes include:

- Increasing knowledge of local issues: 232 adults and youth participants in 2005 (over 3,000 citizens since 1986) became better informed of local issues in need of state assistance and formed effective partnerships to bring them to the attention of state legislators and departments.
- Countywide cooperation: Participants learned how to effectively communicate their local concerns in need of resolution and worked very hard, as a team, in carrying out related action plans.
- Informing state policy makers: Superior Days provided the opportunity for elected officials statewide to become more knowledgeable about the people of Wisconsin and their concerns. This has enabled policy makers to develop policies with a better understanding of the needs of northern Wisconsin. It has also amplified the voices of elected representatives of the region.
- Developing leadership: Both youth and adults developed their leadership abilities, and as a result of their Superior Days experience many assumed leadership roles in their communities by serving on various boards and committees. Participants have emerged as leaders in service and civic organizations, community and neighborhood groups, and some have served on the city council, county board and in the state legislature. One city councilor said, "Superior Days participation provided me the opportunity to become more informed about local issues, develop a better understanding of state government, and realize my leadership potential and the self-confidence to pursue public office."

Some of the most notable accomplishments credited to Superior Days over the years include:

- Major Highway Improvements: U.S. Highway 53 was completed, linking northwest and southern Wisconsin by a four-lane expressway at a cost of \$35 million. The state also allocated \$1 million for construction of passing lanes to improve the safety of U.S. Highway 2.
- Support for University of Wisconsin-Superior: A full-service public radio station, KUWS, was established on the UW-Superior campus. The UWS Health and Wellness Center was constructed and improvements were made to the UWS Gates Gym building. One of the major 2005-06 Superior Days issues is the construction of a new academic building.
- Increased Access to Health Care: The Twin Ports Outpatient Veterans Clinic was brought to Superior when the state lent its financial support (\$250,000). The siting of the clinic was highly

competitive and state support was the deciding factor in the Federal Veterans Administration's choice of Superior. The St. Mary's/Duluth Clinic Superior Hospital Critical Access Care was established through the Superior Days lobbying efforts.

- **Promotion of Tourism:** A new Tourist Information Center was constructed in Superior and is cooperatively operated by state and local tourism employees. The Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center in Ashland was established through the partnership efforts of various groups, including Superior Days.
- **Technology Advancement:** The state created a four-county Technology Development Zone and provided financial support for the development of a fiber optics system linking the educational systems in northwest Wisconsin.
- **Commitment to Great Lakes Research and Infrastructure:** The state allocated \$500,000 for construction of an Aquatic Health Lab for fresh water research on Lake Superior, to be jointly managed by the Great Lakes Tribal Council and UW-Superior. In 2005, the state provided support for the Soo Replacement Lock Project. Efforts to control the spread of invasive species in Lake Superior have been state-funded since the beginning of Superior Days.

The impact of Superior Days extends beyond the city of Superior and Douglas County and highlights a range of northern Wisconsin issues. Several northern counties now participate because their community leaders recognize the program's success in working for their common interests. In 2005, 232 delegates from eight counties took part, with 150 from Douglas County; only 32 were from local governments and the rest were regular citizens and community members/leaders wanting to make a difference.

Significant benefits of Superior Days have included networking, sharing of ideas, and establishing new partnerships between communities in the region. UW-Extension works to build capacity in these communities by convening stakeholders, bringing diverse interests to the table, and facilitating the work of consensus building and shared leadership. When communities work together toward common goals they have the power to influence public policy. For additional information, visit www.superiordays.com.

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