

## Start Simple:

### *Citizen Groups Focus on Results*

Looking for a way to get a group up and running quickly? Do you want to focus on results? Do bylaws, organizational charts and officer elections deflate your enthusiasm? Some groups operate very effectively without those things as a citizen group or citizen committee. How do they do it?

Even large organizations can usually trace their roots to a small loosely organized group with a shared concern, hope or goal. Increased structure, formality and complexity come with growth.

Many organizations have such humble beginnings because starting simple allows a group to focus on its goals and build on its successes. By delaying the development of a more formal structure, there are fewer distractions to drain the group's precious resources of time and energy.

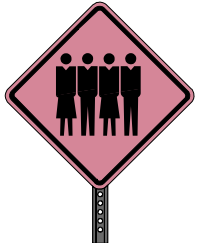
Along Colorado's San Juan Skyway, projects are accomplished with "just a handshake." A community group, called Friends of the San Juan Skyway, receives valuable assistance and leadership from the Office of Community Services at Fort Lewis College. The organization is a powerful testament to what a determined group of citizens can accomplish. Working with a variety of partners, the group developed a comprehensive historic preservation plan that has led to the implementation of a multi-million dollar project to preserve 13 highly visible endangered historic sites and protect thousands of acres of historic landscapes along this All-American Road.

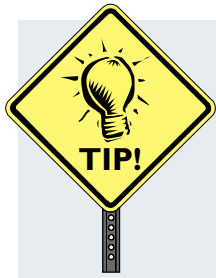


## At a Glance: Citizen Groups

The following chart will help you understand the benefits and limitations of citizen groups.

Citizen Group		
Basic Characteristics	Limitations	Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often the first phase in group formation.</li> <li>• Group members set direction and activities.</li> <li>• May have bylaws, elected officers and an organizational structure, but lacks legal protection.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not required to have bylaws, which can create a lack of structure and clarity in decision making/authority.</li> <li>• Members are personally liable for organizational actions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simple to create.</li> <li>• Can be a group made up of a wide variety of individuals and organizations.</li> <li>• Has the ability to move quickly to get things done.</li> </ul>
Citizen Group with Outside Fiscal Agent		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fiscal agent takes responsibility that funds are received and accounted for/spent properly.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cannot hire staff except through a fiscal agent or another agency.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can utilize another organization's expertise and status in financial matters.</li> </ul>





## Legal Structure Creates Legal Protection

Over time, many citizen groups do adopt team rules, develop bylaws, elect officers and create organizational procedures. However, without taking steps to form a legal structure, you may not have legal protection.

## Simplicity Allows Sharper Focus

Citizen groups, as this generic name suggests, are fairly simple in design. The key component is a committed team of citizens sufficiently organized to carry out some function.

Citizen groups can be started much easier and more quickly than forming a legal organizational structure. They require no bylaws, operate with less formality and require less paperwork. This structure often works well as a group initially forms. It allows a group to focus on its goal, build momentum and attract interest in its activity. It may become a jumping-off point for developing a more formal organization down the road; however, some groups work effectively within this structure for many years.

## Watch Out for Organizational Speed Bumps

A loose structure can create a few bumps on the road to success. Citizen groups can be susceptible to inconsistency in how they function. Without written guidelines, the group's operations may reflect individual styles more than agreed-upon norms. The group may lack clarity regarding decision making, conflict resolution and scope of activities, slowing the progress and conveying disorganization to the broader community. New members may find it difficult to join, since the group's procedures and structure are not clearly articulated.

When there is a lack of formal records, changes in the group composition can leave the group without needed information and expertise. This is especially important if history and decisions have not been documented or a neutral place for storing records has not been identified. Without the separate legal identity that comes with incorporation, the group can't hire staff or handle a significant amount of funds except through an agency that has legal status. This also means that group members can be held personally liable for the group's activities. For additional information on liability see Appendix B.



## Partnering with a Fiscal Agent

Many citizen groups minimize these limitations by obtaining financial and administrative assistance from an outside fiscal agent (or fiscal sponsor). A fiscal agent is an organization that agrees to accept and be responsible for monies on your behalf. Byways often contract with a fiscal agent that acts as the financial department for the group. The fiscal agent receives funds, dispenses payments and tracks how the money is spent.

It is common for byway groups to ask a local government jurisdiction, such as a city or county, to assist them in this capacity. These local governments will usually agree as they have an active or vested interest in the success of the byway.

The fiscal agent assumes responsibility and liability for financial matters, including the responsibility of ensuring that funds are used appropriately. Trust is essential. Importantly, the group should maintain a good relationship with the fiscal agent, since the group's business is generally a minor part of the fiscal agent's activity. Most fiscal agents charge a fee for this service, although a few may be persuaded to donate their services.

A fiscal agent is required only if money in the form of grants, fees, dues, wages or cash donations pass through the organization. If there are no paid staff members and financial activity is limited to in-kind donations, a fiscal agent may not be needed. For example, receiving donated printing services from one entity and meeting space from another can avoid the need for a fiscal agent. Still, as a loosely structured byway group grows, some other form of tighter organizational structure will likely be needed.

## The Fiscal Agent's Tasks

Depending on the contract, the fiscal agent may:

- Perform administrative services
- Receive funds and dispense payments
- Track how the money is spent
- Prepare financial reports
- Accept grant funds



While fiscal agents perform critical and necessary functions, it is wise to be aware of possible problems:

- You will not have direct control over the funds, but will need to deal with one or more intermediaries at the fiscal agency to arrange disbursement;
- There could be delays in accessing funds; and
- Changes in personnel at the fiscal agency could result in delays or miscommunication.

Importantly, maintain a positive relationship and clear communication with your fiscal agent. In searching for a fiscal agent, you may want to consider organizations that have demonstrated an interest in programs or projects similar to yours. It will be easier to find a fiscal agent if your project enhances or furthers that organization's purposes and/or if that organization benefits in some way from being associated with your byway. ★

The Village of Ruidoso acts as fiscal agent for Billy the Kid National Scenic Byway (New Mexico). Many citizen groups depend on local units of government, a regional planning agency, or an outside non-profit organization to assist them with their financial needs.





## CASE STUDY: Native American

# Native American Scenic Byway (South Dakota): Committed to *Okiciapiye* – Helping Each Other

The Native American Scenic Byway is a 101-mile route running through the Crow Creek and Lower Brule Sioux Indian Reservations in South Dakota. In many ways, the byway organization parallels the surrounding landscape—uncomplicated, open and unbuilt.

The road stays close to the Missouri River, with glimpses of prolific birdlife, prairie dogs and reintroduced buffalo. An ancient story unfolds through cultural, historical and archaeological sites located along the byway. Lewis and Clark were among the early visitors. With non-stop prairie vistas, it is easy to imagine the rich indigenous and historic legacy of this land. An important goal of the byway is to provide learning opportunities about native peoples and respect for the environment.



## Starting to Work Together

In November 2000, a meeting was held to discuss organizational structure. The initial group included tribal members, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, local businesses, local development organizations, chambers of commerce, the convention and visitors bureau, town boards, the historical society, a museum, the Dakota Indian Foundation, the State Department of Transportation, State Tourism, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks.

Byway organizers realized some key partners were missing. The group decided to expand the network to include county commissioners, RC&D's (Resource Conservation and Development), the Great Lakes Association, the National Park Service, the National Grassland (USDA), and area schools. The organizers also agreed to make efforts to extend the hand of cooperation to regional contacts in economic and community development.

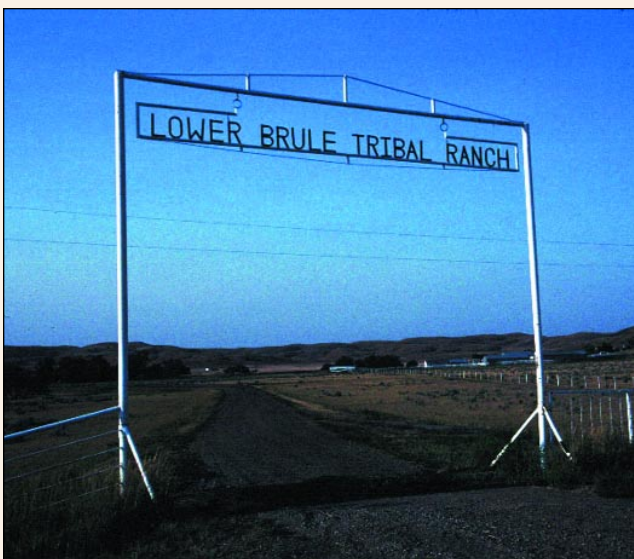
The Native American Scenic Byway practices the traditional principle of *okiciapiye*—meaning *helping each other*. The byway organization makes ongoing efforts to extend the hand of cooperation to a wide range of partners. Members are asked to make a non-cash commitment such as erecting and caring for a wayside exhibit or working on a marketing project.

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## Working Together Works!

Byway representatives brainstormed a list of the benefits of working together:

- To share information with each other and combine resources
- To jointly and consistently interpret the themes of the byway
- To provide resources for educating the public and to raise awareness of Indian culture and the history of central South Dakota
- To become an instrument of reconciliation between the tribes and non-Indians, resulting in improved cohesiveness
- To work at providing infrastructure affecting the byway (e.g. cellular phone deadspots)
- To collaborate on environmental issues as a force for preservation of resources along the byway
- To combine efforts in marketing the byway
- To track visitation along the byway
- To plan for the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial, expected to bring many additional visitors to the area
- To conduct joint long-range development planning
- To foster the involvement of all communities along the byway
- To develop and maintain byway standards (e.g. signage, colors) and other criteria for excellence



Culturally sensitive tourism generates an understanding of the unique history and culture surrounding the Native American Scenic Byway. The Smith Ranch Buffalo Interpretive Center will give visitors a personal in-depth experience with buffalo and the role they played in the lives of the Plains Indians.

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## Defining the Group

What type of group? Participants decided that their organization would follow some of these basic principles:

- (1) financial considerations and ability of certain types of groups to handle money;
- (2) respect for tribal sovereignty;
- (3) maintaining the traditional principle of *okiciapiye*—meaning helping each other;
- (4) multi-jurisdictional concerns related to law enforcement, emergency medical situations, and hunting and fishing; and
- (5) flexibility to operate both on a site-specific basis as well as on matters related to the byway at large.



## Success so Far

After evaluating several structural options, members decided to operate for the time-being as an informal citizen's group, with the Bureau of Indian Affairs serving as the fiscal agent. There would be no dues structure, but membership enrollment would come with a non-cash commitment such as erecting and caring for a wayside exhibit, or joint marketing. The group valued the open communication and informal cooperative arrangements that were part of their informal (and effective) structure—and it's working just fine for this byway organization.

*Note: Without losing the informality of their organization, the group has recently incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, in order to become eligible for certain grant programs. ★*

Lakota, Dakota and Nakota tribes have been hosting visitors to their lands for centuries. Today, the tribes welcome travelers at the “Circle of Tipis” information center at Oacoma, South Dakota. Visitors can observe dancers and drum groups, taste traditional Sioux foods, watch tribal artisans at work, and learn about Indian Country. (Photo: Daphne Richards-Cook)





## CASE STUDY: Lincoln Highway

# The Lincoln Highway (Illinois): Formalizing A Citizens' Organization

People come from near and far to study its historic pavement. Conceived in 1913, the Lincoln Highway was the first paved transcontinental highway built in the United States. It connects the east and west coasts, extending 3,389 miles across thirteen states, with Illinois in the middle. Known as “Main Street of America,” the 179-mile highway segment in Illinois connects 32 Illinois communities in eight counties. The road also literally serves as one of the “main streets” for many of the communities it passes through, including five Illinois Main Street communities and several other downtowns.



The byway organization can trace its roots to people whose focus was the highway itself, including the pavement and the original road alignment. In fact, advocates have been studying the route for decades. Along the way, individuals with other interests—tourism, history, preservation and economic development—were attracted to initiatives involving the road. When 20 to 30 people with diverse interests started showing up at the informal monthly meetings, the group’s focus began to expand beyond the pavement. Members began to look at the structures and treasures on and around the highway, as well as the communities it runs through.

Just outside Malta, Illinois, you’ll find the first paved “seedling mile” on the Lincoln Highway. The one-mile segment of pavement was laid in 1914 to demonstrate the superiority of concrete roads. To get to the paved segment, motorists had to travel on rutted, often muddy, gravel roads before experiencing the smooth, newly paved highway. After smooth driving, motorists then had to bump along the gravel road to return home. Using this strategy, highway advocates were successful in securing public funding for a coast-to-coast highway, and also convinced industries and civic groups to invest private money into paving the highway. (Photo credit: Ruth Frantz)

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## Organizational Evolution

The present group that would become the Illinois Lincoln Highway Coalition began coalescing in 1997, initially to pursue designation as a state heritage tourism demonstration project. Since then, the group has evolved into a stable organization with approximately 40 core members representing tourism partners, historical societies, chambers of commerce, Main Street organizations, municipalities, state agencies and citizens interested in the highway. The mailing list includes some 300 interested agencies, individuals, businesses and organizations.

As the group continued to grow, members felt a need to formalize their structure. Ray Keller, Illinois Lincoln Highway Coalition chair and city planner explained, “As we got further along and had more projects in the works, we thought it would be best to formalize the organization.”

“We needed to have some kind of organization that existed somewhere other than in our own minds. It became important to actually ‘be on the books’ and have an organization that would carry the ball for the future and the projects we had going on. It was an important step that allowed us to move from one person’s vision to a collective group vision.”

In 1999, the group formally established the Illinois Lincoln Highway Coalition by electing a Board of Representatives and adopting bylaws and a strategic plan. Individuals are elected to serve three-year terms (staggered) on the 15-member board, with the board chair appointed every year. Although the bylaws don’t explicitly require a diverse board, the membership includes a wide range of geographic and professional interests each year. The group also attempts to maintain that balance as openings occur. Representatives from the Lincoln Highway Association, a national organization interested in the history of the road, and from the Illinois Department of Transportation districts, without whom this effort would not have succeeded, serve as ex-officio members to the Board.

Decision making is a process that involves everyone who attends the meetings. There is open discussion, consensus and usually general agreement. The board serves as a decision-making mechanism only when the larger group in attendance fails to come to consensus on an issue.

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## Designation Cooperation

The Illinois Lincoln Highway Coalition has recently been incorporated as an independent business entity and has filed for nonprofit status. This allows the Coalition to accept funding directly from the State, rather than through a third-party fiscal agent, and to provide its board members an extra layer of liability protection. To complement the tools available through the corridor's National Scenic Byway designation, the Coalition also secured designation of the corridor as an Illinois Heritage Tourism Demonstration Project in December 2000. With access to the grants and technical assistance associated with both designations, the Coalition has been quick to take advantage of the resources available to establish a toll-free telephone hotline and an interactive Web site, and to publish a new corridor map.

One of the Coalition's major accomplishments in recent years was the completion of its business plan, developed with expert assistance over a 12-month period. Among the principle elements included in the document, the business plan outlines strategies for product development, marketing initiatives and

managing the byway designation. The plan also identifies strategies for ensuring the long-term fiscal sustainability of the group's efforts, particularly focusing on needs and resources to be secured after the fifth and final year of FHWA byway administration funds.

As the organization matures and the number and sophistication of its activities grow, the business plan includes strategies for transitioning the organization from being led by a "working" board, made up of volunteer board members that also act as staff, to a "governing" board, which will predominantly focus on policy development and building relationships with other organizations. To begin this process, the Coalition recently contracted with the Northern Illinois Tourism Development Office, which has been providing informal though extensive support to the effort, to provide dedicated part-time staff to serve as the Coalition's executive director, project coordinator, and sales manager. Over the next three to five years, the roles and responsibilities of the board members and the staff will crystallize into an organizational structure that they collectively believe will be manageable and sustainable over time.

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Ray Keller, Illinois Lincoln Highway Coalition Chair and City Planner for DeKalb, Illinois

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## Personal Commitment

There's no doubt that Coalition members are committed to their byway. Like many byway organizations, the Coalition is a mix of citizen volunteers and individuals that represent their professional affiliations and organizations. While many people see the byway as complementary to their formal job positions, they often put in a lot of personal time on projects, going above and beyond their normal work responsibilities.

It's apparent that this byway organization enjoys working together. A byway member expressed this sentiment, "I've really gotten

to know some good people and I've learned a lot from them." The diverse backgrounds of group members create a rich environment for acquiring new knowledge, skills and experience.

People involved with the Illinois Lincoln Highway Coalition are also motivated by a tremendous sense of pride. They've accomplished something that a lot of people told them they couldn't do. Said one member, "We were told we couldn't succeed, we'd never make it. Now they're standing proof of an organization that proudly and consistently delivers results." ★

The Illinois Lincoln Highway Coalition has developed a Business Plan to provide organizational direction, establish business goals and objectives, identify funding sources, and chart a long-term strategic and sustainable course of action.

