



CLEAN AIR
TASK FORCE

THE POWER OF ENGAGEMENT

On the Right Path: North Plains Connector



Engagement Overview

Grid United, an independent electric transmission developer, is taking a unique landowner-first approach to developing the approximately 420-mile-long North Plains Connector transmission line. Grid United began outreach to landowners, community members, and local organizations in 2022, two years before putting forward a proposed route in a permitting application. The developer collaborated heavily with landowners to determine the best route, and worked closely with state community foundations to design a Community Investment Program (CIP), allowing those foundations to inform the grant structure, timeline, and decision-making process. Although the line has yet to begin construction, Grid United's proactive engagement strategy and success at fostering community relationships demonstrates a promising approach for future transmission development.

Project Overview



TECHNOLOGY
Transmission



DEVELOPER
Grid United



FIRST PROPOSED
2021



ESTIMATED IN-SERVICE
2032



CAPACITY
525 kV, creating approximately 3,000 MW of new transfer capacity between WECC and the Eastern Interconnection

About Southeast Montana

COUNTIES

Rosebud, Custer, and Fallon

COMBINED POPULATION

23,139

ENDPOINT

Coalstrip (pop. 2,300)

CHARACTERISTICS

Rural, prairie, ranching, mining, energy generation, fossil fuel extraction

About Southwest North Dakota

COUNTIES

Golden Valley, Slope, Hettinger, Grant, Morton, Oliver

COMBINED POPULATION

41,417

ENDPOINTS

Center (pop. 581) and St. Anthony (pop. 4,025)

CHARACTERISTICS

Rural, dryland farming and ranching, energy generation, fossil fuel extraction



Engagement Tactics

Learning from the past: In 2012, the Mountain States Transmission Intertie (MSTI) Project, a 430-mile proposed transmission line in the western part of the state, was canceled after four years of significant opposition. This experience left residents and county commissioners with a negative perception of and significant mistrust toward large infrastructure projects because they did not feel sufficiently included in the siting process. Learnings from MSTI contributed significantly to Grid United's approach of early and active engagement with impacted communities.

Flexible siting: Grid United began landowner outreach and hosted its first open house before determining the definitive route for the line. The developer gathered stakeholder input and routed the line in consideration of landowner concerns, while also analyzing detailed environmental and engineering sensitivities and constraints. To date, the project length has increased by 50 miles to abide by local preferences.

Local presence: Grid United has distributed newsletters, requested call-ins, hosted informational breakfasts at local cafes and open houses, and attended local community events—including a golf tournament and the county fair—to build relationships with locals.

Community benefits: Grid United designed a Community Investment Program (CIP) at the outset of the project, demonstrating investment in the community before any permits or project approvals. Through the CIP, which launched in 2023 and will last until 2026, Grid United will invest \$3.9 million into grants for impacted communities, running two grant cycles per year. To date, funds have contributed to renovating parks and buildings, purchasing new fire trucks, expanding a food pantry, and buying laptops for a high school.

Partnership with state foundations: Grid United partnered with the Montana Community Foundation and North Dakota Community Foundation to design the CIP. The foundations helped inform the grant-giving structure and timelines. Decisions on which local organizations are granted money are determined by county-based advisory committees made up of three to five community members that review and recommend grant applications, further deepening the community input process.

Partnership with local universities: Grid United partnered with three local universities—Highlands College, Bismarck State College, and United Tribes Technical College—to establish workforce training programs.

Tribal engagement: Although the line route does not pass directly through Tribal lands, Grid United engaged 21 Tribes across North Dakota and Montana, recognizing the impact the line may have on ancestral lands and cultural resources. Grid United began Tribal outreach before any route was established and prior to any formal consultation required by law. Tribal cultural specialists were invited to join environmental and archeology crews, and Grid United held monthly meetings with the Tribal Historic Preservation Offices to discuss findings and mitigation measures.

Takeaways

A community-driven siting process has fostered trust with local community members. This unique approach deviates from the status quo, requiring significant upfront investment on the part of the developer. Although the project has yet to clear all the hurdles needed to be constructed and put in service, the approach so far has earned the developer and the project positive reputations and may soon present a replicable model for future developments.