

The following project scope narrative was submitted by the Cook County/Grand Marais Joint Economic Development Authority (EDA) in its June 2024 application to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) for a Community Energy Transition Grant.

Taconite Harbor Strategic Plan Project Scope

Northeastern Minnesota has a rich history in timber harvesting and mining due to the mineral-rich and heavily forested lands. With the expansion of iron ore mining, forestry/paper industries, grain exports and shipbuilding on Lake Superior post World War II; power plants, including Laskin Energy Center, Taconite Harbor Energy Center and Boswell Energy Center were built to help accommodate an increasing industrial load. Built in 1957 as part of Erie Mining Company, Taconite Harbor was essentially its own little town; a two-block community with pre-fabricated homes and amenities like a playground, sport courts and community center for plant employees and their families. In the early 1980s, the taconite industry suffered and the workforce at Taconite Harbor was reduced to about 100 employees. By 1986, remaining residents were notified they would have to leave the community. By 1990, any remaining homes and buildings were removed. Minnesota Power acquired Taconite Harbor Energy Center in 2001 and employed approximately 43 staff at the height of employment. Units 1 and 2 were idled in 2016 and coal fired operations were retired in 2021. Closure eliminated skilled positions in Cook County, many of which left the area, and has once again created a sense of unknown for the site's future.

In 2023, Minnesota Power began site decommissioning with closure and removal of the coal pile, which included site grading and establishment of vegetation. In April 2024, MN Power awarded a contract to begin dismantling of the facility. Currently, the contractor is removing regulated materials in preparation for building demolition, which is scheduled to be completed in Summer 2025. While Minnesota Power is taking lead on these efforts, they've been in close contact with Cook County stakeholders and elected officials, signaling their continued commitment to work alongside our community on future redevelopment efforts.

The plant site is approximately 172 acres, with parcels along the shore of Lake Superior and above Highway 61. With mixed ownership between Minnesota Power and Cleveland Cliffs, the site has railroad access, dock facilities and a switching station. The sites topography, historical uses, limited utility access and joint private ownership presents redevelopment and environmental challenges, but through informed research and a robust strategic planning process, Cook County hopes to position the site for future economic activity and recovery from past closures. Grant funding from MN DEED will allow Cook County to solicit proposals from qualified firms with experience in economic development, redevelopment and community engagement. Scope of consultant services may include, but are not limited to:

Research & Analysis

- Comprehensive review of past plans and redevelopment efforts conducted by MN Power
- Study and inventory of existing local and regional economic and community development plans and studies
- Regional industry and market discovery and analysis
- Regional labor study

Land Use Analysis

- Land use study and analysis
- Utility connection capacity analysis and mapping
- Analysis of existing infrastructure (roads, buildings, railroads, dock, waste management capacity)
- Wetland and site topography mapping and analysis
- Permitting considerations (water discharge, rail line, redevelopment, environmental)
- Phase I Environmental Site Assessment

Stakeholder Engagement

- Coordination with current land owners (MN Power and Cleveland Cliffs)
- Stakeholder interviews, engagement and workshops
- Community-wide visioning and engagement
- Consultation with potential commercial, residential, industrial users

Strategy Development & Implementation

- Development of strategic planning scope and timeline
- Marketing & Attraction

Final Report

- Final strategic report addressing phased redevelopment opportunities

Charting a course for the future requires strategic engagement, input, and support from many stakeholders across a spectrum ranging from real estate developers to County residents. Our desire is to create a strategic plan that will help Cook County and current property owners establish the framework to shape future development in a way that is tailored to market realities and civic goals. With a better sense of development potential, Cook County and local/regional stakeholders can advocate for investment and attraction of future uses that encourage tax base growth, employment opportunities, economic diversification and resiliency.