

## “Welcome to where they mark the trees red”

by Sandra Schlagel, MnDOT District 8 public affairs coordinator

Shiny green and white, in its most basic form it’s simply a flat, rectangular piece of metal that sits six feet off the ground, reaches 10 feet into the sky, measures 12 feet across and weighs about 200 pounds. You may recognize one string of reflective white characters against the green background, but the other characters may be unfamiliar. And whether or not you recognize the languages written on the giant sheet of metal, they convey much more than an ordinary traffic sign. Each language, one Dakota, the other American English, is there to welcome you when you enter the Lower Sioux Indian Community.

The welcome sign is the first of four Dakota-English language road signs going up in the Lower Sioux Indian Community. Following a private ground blessing, it was unveiled to the community and guests near Morton, on Redwood County Road 24 near Reservation Highway 5 on Monday, July 29, 2019. It designates the west boundary of the Lower Sioux Indian Community and an identical sign will be installed at the north, east, and south community boundaries as well. The signs inform all of the Dakota language homeland name before European settlement.

“It’s something for our members to be proud of, our children, our elders, all of us,” said Lower Sioux Indian Community President Robert Larsen, “that back in 2012, the leadership at the time saw how devastated our language was for us, so they passed a resolution that said our Dakota language is in peril and we need to do whatever we can to bring it back.”

In addition to starting language programs, the Lower Sioux began working with Indian Affairs and the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) to develop road signs in the Dakota language. The concept and program took years to progress and fine-tune, however, the end result is beautiful. The sign symbolizes language preservation, a sense of community and homeland, as well as awareness and partnership.

Although the four signs are not owned by the state and they are not located on state highways, MnDOT is in the business of making road signs and is also committed to developing government-to-government relationships through partnerships with sovereign nations. The Lower Sioux Indian Community also partnered with Redwood County to bring the signs from an idea to a reality on the Redwood County roads.

“When we come home here, we’re going to see that sign and have some self-pride,” said Larsen, following the unveiling, pointing to the sign and addressing the roadside gathering of community members, MnDOT and Redwood County representatives and local media. “I’m hoping that everyone’s going to take a piece of that and just smile when they see it and build more relationships with everyone that comes here. Thank you for being here, this is important to us.”

For information about the MnDOT Dakota and Ojibwe Language Signing Program, visit [mndot.gov/mntribes/language-culture](https://mndot.gov/mntribes/language-culture).



Left to right: Keith Berndt, Redwood County engineer, Jon Huseby, MnDOT district engineer, D8, Kevin O’Keefe, Lower Sioux Indian Community assistant secretary/treasurer, Grace Goldtooth, Lower Sioux Indian Community vice president, Jane Steffen, Lower Sioux Indian Community secretary, Robert Larsen, Lower Sioux Indian Community president, Earl Pendleton, Lower Sioux Indian Community treasurer, Chris Chee, Lower Sioux Indian Community Roads Department, Edward Fairbanks, MnDOT deputy tribal liaison.