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Redhead Mountain Bike Park, a reclaimed mineland, earns a national innovation award and brings economic growth

MINNEAPOLIS, MN—Redhead Mountain Bike Park, designed by Barr Engineering Co. in collaboration with the City of Chisholm, Minnesota, and the Minnesota Department of Iron Range Resources & Rehabilitation (IRRR), received an Honor Award on May 15, 2024, as part of the national Engineering Excellence Awards competition, hosted by the American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC). The project previously garnered an Engineering Excellence Awards Grand Award and the People's Choice Award in February 2024 as part of a state-level competition hosted by ACEC of Minnesota (ACEC/MN).

Once an inactive iron-mine complex in northern Minnesota, the land that is now Redhead was inaccessible to the public for more than four decades until the City and IRRR, in conjunction with the Minnesota Discovery Center, partnered with Barr, the mining industry, and local stakeholders to create a world-class mountain bike park and local economic engine in this uniquely beautiful and rugged landscape.

Redhead is an experiment in the use of inactive mines for recreation. Barr worked with the City and the IRRR to develop and apply an innovative, cooperative land-use strategy. The City hired Barr to design more than 35 miles of single-track mountain biking trails through this scenic landscape. The trails were designed to avoid iron-ore stockpiles and other potentially usable mine features and to be relocatable, should mining return. This multi-benefit approach to mine repurposing allows mining and recreation to coexist and provides Chisholm with economic diversification and added resilience.

"Barr assisted in developing a unique approach that allowed the City to reuse the inactive mine land in Chisholm for economic and recreational development," said Bridgit Maruska, Director of City of Chisholm Parks, Trails, & Recreation. "Multiple stakeholders were involved and finding consensus was not easy. Barr's vision, dedication, flexibility, and ability to find solutions that worked for everyone helped keep the project on track."

Redhead delivered early economic benefits for Chisholm. The Minnesota Cycling Association held a middle-school and high-school championship race at the park, generating nearly \$1 million in local revenue—over half the construction costs. The City of Chisholm's downtown area has welcomed new businesses catering to Redhead visitors from across the Midwest and beyond, boosting the local economy. Redhead has helped this mining town, once tethered to a boom-and-bust industry, expand its



identity to include “mountain biking destination” and welcome economic opportunities that were previously unimaginable.

“The completion of the park and its impact on Chisholm have been resoundingly successful,” Maruska said. “Millions of dollars have been injected into the local community, bringing in more small businesses and supporting economic growth and planning. The park also provides opportunities that improve quality of life and support community connection for area residents.”

The final trail alignment was based on many factors, including the presence of mine shafts and other features, desirable views, sensitive plant species, slope stability, local drainage, and ease of maintenance. To make Redhead a nationally recognized mountain bike park, the trails were designed to provide an exhilarating ride for all skill levels while incorporating factors of safety and sustainability. The park is also used for hiking, ATV use, and water recreation, so it was important to avoid interference among various users. Following International Mountain Bicycling Association trail construction guidelines, Barr worked with the construction manager to field-fit the design and conduct the environmental review and permitting for construction.

The first 25 trail miles were completed in 2022. Future development of Redhead will include the additional 10-plus miles of trail construction, a more permanent trailhead, enhanced signage, and a 10-year master plan. Barr is under contract with the City to support this work.

“Barr was honored to assist the City of Chisholm in creating Redhead and continuing to make the park a success,” said Barr Vice President and Senior Environmental Engineer Pete Kero, who collaborated with community leaders to develop a vision for Redhead and led Barr’s efforts on the project. “Demonstrating that it’s possible to give these dormant mined lands a new life and see the enjoyment the park is bringing to people is an extremely rewarding experience.”

Barr helped make Redhead a success by exercising a deep understanding of mining operations and by designing for the needs of both the mining industry and the public. This project demonstrates that engineers have a prominent role to play in helping mine reclamation in Minnesota evolve into mine repurposing—the practice of not just revegetating but reviving idled mines for the benefit of mining communities.

To learn more about Barr and Redhead Mountain Bike Park, visit barr.com.

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About Barr

Barr Engineering Co. is an employee-owned engineering and environmental consulting firm incorporated in 1966. Barr solves complex challenges and delivers comprehensive solutions in the public, mining, fuels, power, and manufacturing sectors. Barr’s more than 1,000 employee owners serve clients across North America and the world.