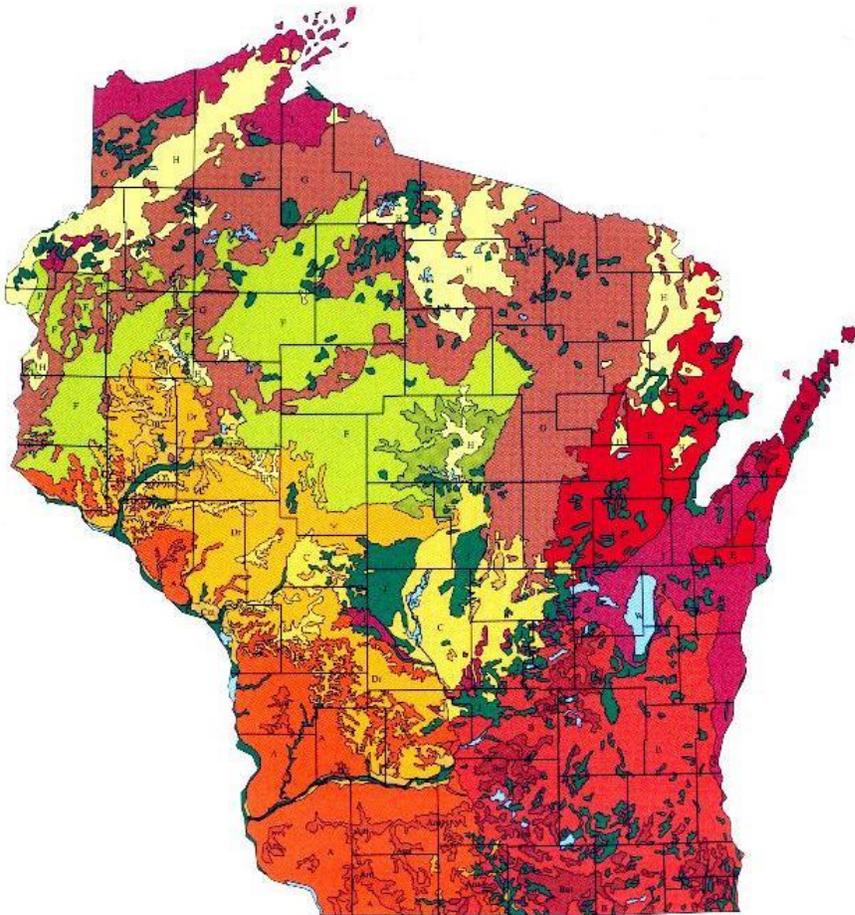


Discussion Regarding Self-Assessments and Grant Applications

Self-appraisals are deceptively attractive. They look like a good idea, but they're not.

An effective self-assessment would require a broad range of knowledge about all of the other situations and related grant requests being submitted in that cycle. To have an accurate assessment with rankings that are truly relevant to the overall system, all submitters would need to have the same level of knowledge and commitment to enable them to get it right. Outside influences would also have to be eliminated.

Topographic features, man-made trail structures, and soil types differ widely between counties – sometimes even within a county. Intensity of trail use also varies as do acts of nature that have an impact on some trail systems but not others.



With that in mind, it would not be unusual for a single or small number of counties to have a number of very high priority grant requests in a cycle. Other counties, with less of a relative need, could also present their projects as *their* highest priority. Trying to resolve the true relative system-wide values of all of the projects while relying on locally scored self-assessments introduces a superficial layer of information to sort through. Trying to sort through subjective self-assessments unnecessarily detracts from managing grant requests.

As has often been pointed out, there are too many combinations of variables to the circumstances of projects to develop a reliable numeric system of ranking them. Even when exhaustive efforts are made to try to capture factors related to a project, ranking efforts are still ineffective due to the inherent flaw of subjective ratings.

Studies have consistently shown that self-assessments are notoriously inaccurate.

- Assessments are made by people that do not have equal knowledge, understanding, or ability – especially regarding program-wide issues.

- Often those with the worst level of knowledge and understanding mistakenly produce ratings far above a more realistic assessment. People usually mean well, but they often don't know what they don't know.

- Often those that do have well developed knowledge and understanding make a more realistic rating, often lower than what is merited, and certainly lower than many of the rankings of the less informed. Those with broad knowledge that lends itself to making a better assessment often mistakenly assume that others are operating on the same level. They can mistakenly believe that others are making as accurate of an assessment as theirs with an outcome that the relative rankings for their own projects are less than they deserve.

- Without a broad level of knowledge of the grant applications being submitted program-wide in a cycle, the self-assessor lacks the ability to make an accurate appraisal of how his or her individual projects rank overall in the cycle.

- There can also be a more self-serving motive as there can be competition for available dollars which can motivate some to inflate their rankings. This may also involve pressure from various sources to take steps to out-compete others for grant money.

A model that demonstrates some of the factors that influence subjective ratings is as follows. Priority A is afraid of being considered as Priority B, while Priority B is afraid as being regarded as Priority C, while Priority C can mistakenly believe they are Priority A.

So what is the probable outcome based on trying to implement a system of subjective local self-assessments for grant applications? We would create an artificial layer of inherently defective assessments that would have to be sorted through to achieve a reasonably accurate assessment with regard to how important a project is with regard to what is being considered throughout the program during a grant cycle.

In addition to adding a distracting layer that does not enhance the process, subjective self-assessments introduce misunderstanding and potential conflicts. People end up arguing about self-developed evaluations instead of dealing with the neutral facts on the ground.

Trying to make decisions about the relative value of grant requests is a very difficult job. The council is not all-knowing or all-seeing as they approach this task, but they do have visibility of all of the grant applications being submitted program-wide during a cycle. This lends itself to the council being able to reasonably assess the relative value of projects. The last thing we need to do is to add confusion to the system with a layer of subjective self-assessments.

The better system is to refine grant applications to ensure that they clearly demonstrate actual need. A neutral depiction of the situation on the ground that encompasses the factors that are relevant to the request is what is best for the council to use for an evaluation. All are required to simply present facts and supporting images in the appropriate manner without relying on subjective claims. Arguments about the level of development of a trail, safety issues, and the like would need to be clearly explained and justified with facts – as is reasonable for a grant application in the first place. There will also need to be a distinction between actual need and desired enhancements within the categories that are already defined. This is by far the most rational and standard method to approach managing grant requests.

(The above paragraph is a brief description of part of a program addressing improving the grant application process that will be covered elsewhere.)