

Discussion and Recommendation Regarding Improving Grant Applications

Purpose

The primary purpose of this ad hoc committee is to develop recommendations as to how to improve grant applications. The intent is to assist applicants in submitting a well-developed submission on which the council can act, and to assist the council in ensuring that available funds are properly allocated to meet the needs of the program.

Background

Mission of the council:

The authority and responsibilities of the council are defined by Wisconsin Statutes, sections 15.09, 15.347(9) and 23.178, supplemented by these procedural bylaws.

The off-road vehicle council shall provide advice and make recommendations to the department of natural resources, the department of transportation, the governor, and the legislature on all matters relating to all-terrain vehicle trails and all-terrain vehicle routes, including matters relating to activities conducted on all-terrain vehicle trails and all-terrain vehicle routes by all-terrain vehicle users and utility terrain vehicle users, and shall make recommendations to the department of natural resources with regard to incentive payment requests under s. 23.33(5r) and requests for funding under s. 23.33(9)(b), (bb), and (bg).

The council found that some applications were not sufficiently developed to give members a clear understanding of the request allowing them to fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities. In some cases, key information was absent or not meaningfully addressed.

Instead of having to put aside an inadequately prepared grant request, the council undertook an initiative to help requestors become more successful with their applications. Instead of waiting until the funding meeting to review applications, with the risk of an application being denied due to insufficient information, the council took on the task of a preliminary review of applications a month prior. This allowed council members to ask questions to clarify, amplify, or otherwise improve the information and justification in an application without having to make a decision based on what they reviewed at that moment. By means of this process, requestors had an opportunity to address information shortfalls in time to still be considered at the funding meeting. This was a very positive and helpful initiative by the council to assist grant applicants.

The month out step was still not sufficient to ensure that all applications were complete enough to document **actual need**, distinguish between actual need and **enhancements**, or for council members to understand any vaguely presented justification for an action. The step to improve grant request submissions is an action to further develop the application process to do even more to assist applicants in being successful while enabling the council to have the information they need to make decisions that best support the program.

Improved Approach

Improving applications involves justifying and documenting **actual needs**. Focusing on needs first, and other lower priority **enhancements** later (as value and funds allow), helps the council to do more to ensure that funds are best allocated in support of the program.

Actual needs: Conditions that require action to be taken. A broken bridge, blown out culvert, significant erosion, and other common hot spots associated with trail maintenance.

Enhancements: Enhancements are not required to have a sustainable trail, but they may offer a desirable improvement that makes the trail more attractive for some. For example, adding gravel to an otherwise sound section of trail that is based on native soils is not required, but it may be something that someone may prefer.

There have been many quality grant requests submitted as part of this program. This effort is to improve those that need further development, and to contribute to more common understanding and standardization that will ensure that everyone's requests will be given appropriate consideration.

We contribute to establishing a common standard by ensuring that we distinguish between **actual needs** and **enhancements** (preferences) so that that we address needs before we begin to address enhancements.

No element can take unfair advantage of the program if all applicants have to clearly demonstrate **actual need** and distinguish it from a lower priority **enhancement**. In any grant program anywhere there is the potential for an applicant to try to take advantage beyond what is appropriate. In any situation involving grants, it is important for the people tasked to review the requests to have the information they require to ensure that requests are appropriate, allowed by law, and in support of the best interests of the program.

Application quality is key. We need to understand the situation on the ground (adequate information) so that we can compare varying degrees of need to make sure things are properly addressed.

Toward that end, we offer some specific additional guidance in the appendix to this document that is based on our previous experience evaluating requests. This is done with the intent to help make grant requestors and the council as a whole more successful.

As before, if a request wasn't properly substantiated, the council could be reluctant to approve it and may reject it outright. One of the highest priorities of the council is to meet as many **actual needs** as they can. The goal of the council is not to deny more requests. The goal is to have well documented requests that allow us to make best use of the funds available to ensure that as many needs are taken care of as can be and that we are best supporting the program.

Highlighting Actual Needs

Most important is that we take care of actual needs first. Then, as resources allow, we can evaluate and prioritize proposed enhancements. This concept is similar to what people do with their personal budgets.

Some have suggested that we have some specific list to describe a standard surface for all trails. This could involve something like adding gravel of a certain depth to every trail just to have a standard gravel surface. There are so many potential circumstances that could be involved in a particular section of trail that it would be nearly impossible to formulate a catalog that would describe the **actual needs** of every situation. There are many references that discuss techniques for addressing trail construction and maintenance under a variety of circumstances. Due to the number of variables that could be involved, no one size fits all is available.

There are sound principles that contribute to establishing sustainable trails. By applying the techniques associated with these we can easily identify actual need and the remedy required. A review of some trail construction and sustainability references did not produce any across the board requirements for all trails. References start with a base of native soil and then offer technical practices to deal with problems that present themselves as conditions and use vary.

Trail references do not describe any standard surface like gravel or gravel depth. They do describe practices that can be implemented to make a trail sustainable.

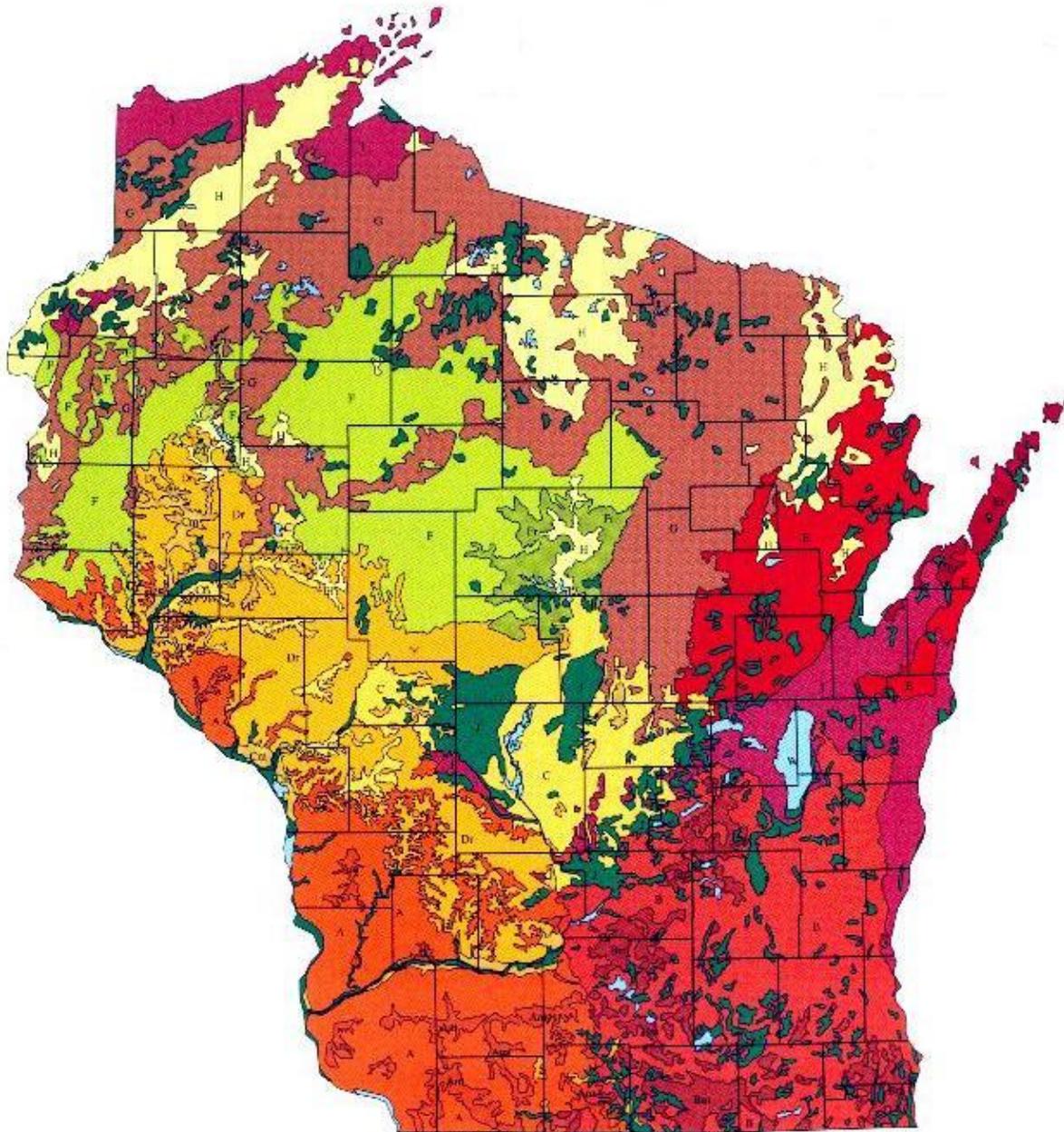
Some suggested dealing with gravel by describing a standard based on inches of material. Again, there is no set standard. If a section of trail actually required gravel the amount would be based on what was actually needed there. For example, a stable trail of native soils would not need gravel but a soft bridge approach might need a substantial amount of rock and gravel.

Keep in mind that we are not dealing with a highway network with specific DOT standards. We are dealing with a recreational trail system for all-terrain vehicles. Highway-like trails may not be affordable or desirable.

Experience has proven that trails can be based on native soils providing that needs to appropriately deal with hot spots are addressed. This is probably the most prevalent surface in trail systems anywhere. Amounts of **enhancement** beyond **actual need** vary. It is always the highest priority to deal with actual needs first, and consider enhancements at a lower priority as funds and the value to the program allow.

Some agencies may have more requests for actual needs or enhancements than others because of the nature of their trail system: soils, topography, intensity of use, existing sustainability, and the like. Within a single trail system there can be a wide variety of soil types, elevation profiles, and other relevant conditions. We are more focused on actual needs than jurisdictional boundaries. Some jurisdictions may require more than others. Not all trails get equal amounts of use.

Many of us ride trails all over the country. We get to make first-hand observations about sustainability issues across a broad array of circumstances particular to trails. We get to observe and experience what is good and bad and what the relative value of improvements and enhancements are.



With regard to rehabilitation, no one ever intended for trails to be rebuilt on a ten year cycle. It is not “automatic”. Rehabilitation is based on **actual needs** to rehabilitate that go beyond what can be done with maintenance funds.

Rehabilitation must be based on actual need. If sections of a trail require a rehab at 7 years due to some catastrophic damage that can’t be addressed with maintenance funds, they should get it. On the other hand, they should not be rehabilitated until they require it. For some sections of trail this could be 12, 15, 20 or more years. Rehabilitation means to “restore to good condition”. It does not include enhancements that are not required by the otherwise satisfactory condition of the trail.

A common misstep is to include enhancements within a rehabilitation request. Some may believe that since ten years have passed they should do a “whole road” instead of addressing the sections that truly need rehab. A quote from an app: “We only get one rehab request every ten years so doing the entire trail only makes sense.” A path does not uniformly require the same amount of maintenance or rehabilitation. For a seven mile stretch, there could be short segments that truly need rehab. Some may desire to improve the entire path under the terms of a rehab grant. Since applying rehab (high priority) dollars to the non-rehab (enhancement) part of the path is inappropriate based on actual need and definition, the request would have to be split by **actual need** and **enhancements**. This is not to say that the enhancement wouldn't be funded after other priority projects are addressed. It is to say that enhancements would be properly and fairly sorted out from higher priority rehab requests based on actual need. In the end, money would have to be available and the proposal would have to make sense with regard to the overall value to the program.

A parallel is what townships do with road repair with their budgets. They often replace only short segments of deteriorated road versus repaving miles of otherwise usable roads.

Expectations and preferences that go beyond actual needs relate to funds available. Actual needs come first and must be well documented.

Sand, by itself, does not require additional surfacing across a trail system with other materials. Some entire trail systems are built on sand. While sand may not be good for cars and trucks, it is certainly not a significant obstacle for all terrain vehicles. Like everything else, justified actual needs would be part of a grant request addressing sand related issues. Quote from a grant request: “The sandy soils and flat topography help to keep this trail sustainable.”

Discussion - Enhancements

Each time we add gravel to an otherwise sound section of trail, we are creating a future obligation to sustain that gravel. As gravel is graded wider and wider on a forest road/trail over time, more gravel will be required to sustain the surface. So, one must consider the value of continuing to add gravel to sustain the initial gravel application in future years. Adding gravel where it is not required can incur a long term expense to the program.

Ease of grading is not a factor if gravel was applied to an otherwise satisfactory surface that already offered minimum maintenance. The ability to satisfactorily maintain trails without extraordinary effort is an important concern to everyone. However, requests to improve the ease of maintenance must be appropriately categorized with regard to actual need and enhancements.

Making a trail smooth may not make it more sustainable or make it easier to maintain. It can actually increase the need to apply more resources and effort to keep it that way. This is another reason to consider what requirements we generate in the future for an action now.

Making a smooth gravel trail does not by itself improve safety. It can actually decrease safety by encouraging higher speeds and poorer traction for low pressure ATV tires. Keep in mind that many ATV fatalities are on roads.

Gravel can introduce significant dust issues – although dust issues can exist with other surfaces.

Sometimes requests are made with regard to making it easier for snow groomers. Some specifically ask us to fund the application of gravel to accommodate snow groomers. We appreciate our snowmobile partners, but it is difficult to deal with a request that is presented with principally snowmobile concerns. Other factors relating to snow depth and when grooming is being performed may offer a remedy.

Subjective Self-Assessment

(See related discussion document regarding self-assessment and grant applications.)

At one point, someone suggested a system where applicants would self-assess and prioritize their own projects and submit that assessment as criteria for the council to use to rank and order grant requests. The first problem is that there is no standardized way to ensure that each application bears the correct assessment with regard to the entire program. Being principally subjective, it would be of little use overall. Someone's top priority locally may not even be close to the highest priorities for the overall program. Doing a subjective self-assessment can add another layer that has to be sorted through to get down to the one standard criteria that is most important: **actual need**.

We already have a system of priorities to address **actual needs**. What must be done is to sort out **enhancements** to an appropriate priority.

Varying User Preferences

User preferences vary. Some want smooth trails and some want rugged. Add in that a single trail or trail system is usually not uniform in the rider experience being offered. Conflicting ideas about rider experience can be a problem when it comes to determining what enhancements might be appropriate for a trail system. This can be a troubling issue for all involved. Perhaps a solution might be to follow the doctrine that allows for varying experiences being offered in a trail system.

“So, if I can't justify an actual need, will I get my grant request or not?”

Properly classifying something as an enhancement does not eliminate it from being approved via a grant request. It simply gets the action into the proper category with regard to other priorities and helps ensure fairness by ensuring that everyone's actual needs are addressed first.

The common standard of distinguishing between **actual needs** and **enhancements** is important. The council is committed to fixing actual problems beyond what can be done using maintenance dollars. This is especially true for actions that pose a bona fide and well substantiated threat to other programs such as forest certification.

Increased workload for applicants?

Taking the time to prepare a well-documented grant application that justifies the need for what is requested has always been a requirement. Some applicants put more effort into creating well-developed applications than others. What we need now is for all applicants to recognize the difference between actual needs and enhancements and then properly substantiate their requests under the existing program. For example, it is not enough to claim “safety” as a factor without explaining exactly what the unsafe condition is and how the requested action will make conditions more safe while recognizing that trail riding is inherently unsafe in the first place.

Grant applicants are not being given a significant additional burden regarding their requests. Some will have to do more to support their grant request than they have in the past which was probably already required in the first place.

An examination of grant requests from the last cycle reveals the following:

- There were 78 grant requests for a total of around \$4.9M dollars.
- There were 28 entities making requests for an average of 2.8 requests per entity.
- The average amount per request was around \$63K.
- Number of grant requests per entities.

| <u># Entities</u> | <u>had this</u> | <u># Requests</u> |
|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1 | | 6 |
| 4 | | 5 |
| 5 | | 4 |
| 4 | | 3 |
| 8 | | 2 |
| 6 | | 1 |

Trail Standards

Since there are a broad number of specific circumstances and remedies that contribute to a properly constructed trail in widely varying situations, it is difficult to describe a construction standard that will address every situation. Circumstances vary based on use, soils, terrain, water, slope, level of maintenance, and many more aspects that affect trails.

There are many references that discuss techniques for addressing trail construction and maintenance under a variety of circumstances. Again, no “one size fits all” solution is available there.

However, there are sound principles that contribute to establishing sustainable trails. By applying the techniques associated with these principles as they apply to the specific situation at hand, we are able to determine what design, work, and materials are appropriate.

The council focuses on doing what is necessary to keep trails sustainable and to prevent significant wear, erosion, hazard, and adverse environmental issues.

Since we don’t have unlimited resources, this means the council has to determine the best use of our funds to address what is necessary. If sufficient resources are available beyond that, the council may approve enhancements beyond what is actually required to sustain the trail system.

This avoids faulty standards to do not consider all of the circumstances involved – such as saying we will pay for gravel up to a certain depth.

An Unresolved Issue

On September 25th, 2014, several ORV council members were invited guests at a Wisconsin County Forest Association meeting in Rothschild, WI. During the meeting the council was criticized by some WCFA members for approving grant applications that they (WCFA members) didn't even want in the first place. This was an astonishing revelation to the ORVC members that were present – especially after being asked previously to “just trust” that if foresters say they want something they truly need it. The principal speaker on this issue, and those that added remarks, indicated that sometimes foresters were required to submit grant requests that they didn't support, want, or need due to local political pressures or direction to do so. These remarks not only expressed frustration with their own local problems, but also seemed critical of the council for approving the requests. One ORVC member answered that if foresters submit a signed request for a grant, the council can only believe that if they request it they want it. There did not seem to be an obvious solution for this issue with regard to specifically addressing it under the topic of improving grant requests. We are not able to detect if someone is submitting a grant request for something they don't actually want. The best course of action is to require well developed grant requests that substantiate the need for what is being requested and follow the system from there. If a grant request is inadequate, the council may not be able to approve it. If the action requested is not a high enough priority with regard to the overall program, the council may not be able to approve it. This situation highlights why it is important for the council to carefully consider each request in accordance with their fiduciary duties.

Summary

The grant application process needs to be improved to ensure that grant applications clearly substantiate 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. A distinction between actual need and desired enhancements is required so that enhancements are appropriately categorized for consideration. This is by far the most rational and standard method to approach managing grant requests. Some clarifying points of guidance are included in the appendix to this document.

Appendix 1 Notes to Discussion and Recommendation Regarding Improving Grant Applications

This appendix provides some notes and relevant guidance regarding a sampling of topics that may be included in a grant request.

It is not enough to simply mention safety when offering the issue as a relevant factor in a grant request. It is important to describe the unsafe condition and specifically how the requested action will improve safety keeping in mind that ATV riding is inherently unsafe in the first place. If someone offers safety as an issue but does not articulate the issue and remedy we can only ignore the remark as a significant factor since it was not explained. Safety is an important concern to the council. It should be important enough to explain if the issue is introduced in a grant request. We can't guess what point an applicant is trying to make. Keep in mind that a safety issue on a trail may have a variety of remedies. These could include signage, speed restrictions, visibility, trail surface conditions, topography, intensity of use, and the like. Accident reports that relate to unsafe conditions may be relevant. Keep in mind that adding gravel to a trail surface may actually detract from safe conditions rather than improving them. One unsafe condition could easily be replaced by another without a significant improvement in safety overall.

If gravel is being proposed as part of a remedy the need must be clearly justified. There needs to be specific information about why the existing trail surface needs to be improved and what the value of adding gravel will be. It will be important to justify the need for adding gravel. Keep in mind that introducing gravel also introduces future expenses for sustaining the gravel surface. The need must justify taking on future expenses for maintaining a gravel surface. Photos/videos that clearly demonstrate need along the length of the proposed project will be required. The proposed dimensions of the gravel application will need to be clearly described including how deep and wide the gravel will be and what compaction factor is being applied. There are restrictions regarding the width of a trail surface being addressed under this program.

It will be important to describe previous maintenance efforts when asking for additional funds to rehabilitate a section of trail. This is because additional funds are being requested beyond the previous payments for trail maintenance. Some cases of catastrophic damage due to a storm will be quite obvious. Long term deterioration generates an interest in previous maintenance efforts. It is important that we know what work is effective in sustaining a trail, including previous rehabilitations, as we consider a rehabilitation proposal.

Erosion problems may require trail design improvement beyond resurfacing. We need to address root issues rather than repeating the same effort due to a trail design that could be improved.

Statements like "it can no longer be graded" need to be substantiated with appropriate references (photos) and descriptions. The council needs to be able to understand the need the applicant is trying to describe.

In the past there have been remarks about getting ATVs off a "busy township road". Busy is a relative term. In some counties and situations that could mean a very high traffic count. In others, "busy" is much less substantial. A better description is required to support a contention like this.

An argument might be made for gravel that would improve the surface for hikers, bicyclists, and snowmobilers. Keep in mind that there are funding sources that relate to their interests that might be more appropriate than ATV funds.

One picture of one location does not substantiate the need for an entire project. The number of pictures used to substantiate needs should be sufficient to describe the entire project. This does not mean that images must be contiguous. It does mean that they should adequately demonstrate the need for an action.

Taking an action to prevent something in the future does not by itself demonstrate that there is an actual need at the present time. Prevention is important, but it must be addressed with the appropriate priority. Describe the scale of the problem, the current need, and the potential future need.

Stating that something makes the trail “much easier to maintain” does not clearly establish the need for an action. One would have to address the scale of the current maintenance problem and if the action is a current need or an enhancement.

Intensity of use can be a relevant factor. Quantifying that use can make it easier to give a higher priority to a project where this is a factor.

Claiming that a path is “nearly inoperable” for an ATV would require substantiation. ATVs can handle rugged terrain.

Boardwalks can be expensive to build and maintain. It is important to demonstrate the need for a boardwalk in lieu of an alternate route.

Any issues that are based on snowmobile concerns need to clearly substantiate why this is an issue for the ATV program and not the snowmobile program.

Treating hotspots is a preferred technique rather than applying a uniform treatment to a trail that does not have uniform needs. As an example, when referring to concerns like protruding rock, describe the actual problem area. Likewise, an entire trail will not likely require rehab along the entire length of the trail. Grant applications must separate the areas of actual need for rehabilitation from other areas that do not require rehab but for which someone might propose an enhancement like adding gravel.

When referring to rider enjoyment or rider experience in an application, keep in mind that rider preferences are not uniform. One group may prefer a smooth trail while another may prefer a rugged trail. Doctrine for trail design refers to offering a variety of rider experiences within a trail system. Instead of having a goal to make an entire trail system smooth, managers might find that user preferences are better met by having loops that offer varying experiences.

It is not proper to attribute a list of problems to an entire length of trail. For example, if within a 5 mile trail segment there are issues that relate to roughness, protecting a wetland, and erosion (as examples), break out the need for each of the problems instead of claiming uniform issues for the entire distance.

Sand, by itself, is not a problem for ATVs. In fact some entire trail systems are built on sand. Requests to replace the surface would need to distinguish between actual needs and enhancements and the substantiation would need to demonstrate why it was appropriate.

When claiming that a trail surface causes problems for trail groomers, be specific. What problem for what type of groomer, why, and what remedies have been considered.