

Discussion Regarding Site Visits by Individuals

Background

Recently there was some discussion regarding a member of the council visiting a grant application site and taking photographs that he later shared with the council as information relating to a grant request. Mike Peterson (WCFA) objected to members visiting a grant request site without the land manager being present. It appeared as if site visits like this did not sit well with Mike and perhaps a few others. As a side note, grant applications are submitted for the council to consider without the land manager being present. It seems appropriate to revisit this issue to ensure a common understanding regarding this kind of activity.

Mike Peterson (WCFA) introduced the idea of visiting a project site by scheduling a council visit in Rusk County for an in-person look at a site involved in a grant application. The intent was to show us, by our in-person visit, what was described in the application. This visit demonstrated the value of seeing first-hand what the situation was on the ground instead of solely relying on what was described in an application or in remarks at a meeting. Those that attended are grateful for this valuable experience that was based on Mike's suggestion.

Likewise, council members also appreciated the photographs shared by a council member after his visit to a grant request site. As is usually the case, a neutral array of photographs can give a very clear picture of the situation on the ground. Grant requests sometimes lack some information that could describe the project more clearly. In this case the council member's photographs taken during his visit to the site proved to be very relevant and useful information.

Council Members and Trail Knowledge

Members of the council are motorized trail users. They have experience riding trails not only in Wisconsin, but in other states across the country. This first-hand experience is part of what qualifies them to fulfill the duties and responsibilities of the council. Most have been able to compile a great deal of knowledge by their observations and experiences with trail conditions, problems, and how well remedies work under a variety of circumstances. Some members have been formally trained in trail design, construction, and maintenance techniques. Members are **expected** to apply their observations, knowledge, and experience as they fulfill the mission of the council.

Council Initiatives to Improve the Process

It continues to be a priority for the council to improve grant applications to try to ensure that customers are best served. The first step by the council was to provide for a preliminary review to allow submitters the opportunity to make their applications more complete to avoid being otherwise denied at the formal funding meeting. The idea was to improve conditions to make applicants more successful. There is a second phase being developed to help applicants present more complete (and therefore likely more successful) applications. Considering the council's initiatives to improve things, how will they ever know if the grant applications are doing a good job of reflecting the actual needs on the ground if they don't

visit some sites described in applications? How can the council develop better methods to assist grant applicants if they lack this vital feedback?

Individual vs. Council Actions

Members are not acting in the name of the council as they see and do things in pursuit of their recreational interests. However, they are entitled to the knowledge they develop during their pursuits – including visiting a particular site that they might be interested in as a result of their service to the council.

The council by-laws already make it clear that visits of this type, whether intentional or inadvertent, are unofficial and are not tasks *directed* by the council unless specifically authorized. The council as a body is not directing these visits. These are individual actions apart from council actions.

Council members may not generally present themselves as a representative of the council as a body without specific authorization. With that in mind, it may be unacceptable for the council member to meet with a land manager on the subject of a grant request during a visit to a site.

There is nothing wrong with seeing something first-hand. Council members are entitled to share whatever relevant knowledge they develop on these and other visits or experiences.

Since council members are trail riders, they are going to be out riding in pursuit of their recreational interest apart from anything to do with their role on the council. It would be absurd to think that council members should avoid trail segments that might be involved in grant requests. It would be contrary to the mission of the council to expect members to close their eyes and not include anything they have seen when they are called upon to exercise their judgement about grant requests. Keep in mind that members would have little or no idea about what areas might be involved in a grant request until well into the riding season anyway.

Value to the Program

There is no problem with a council member visiting a grant application site and later sharing information with the rest of the council about what he saw. We historically have had members reporting about their observations about trail segments based on their visits. Photographing some or all of the site provides visual images that can often be more clearly interpreted than a less developed written or verbal description.

Grant applications are initiated based on need as observed by someone that surveys the trail. Why would it ever be unreasonable for a council member to visit a trail and see exactly what the conditions are? How is more information ever bad? The observations of a member could further support the need described in a grant request.

Why would anyone object to a visit to a trail grant application site by a council member? What would be the reason for this objection? Facts are facts. It is a basic tenet that things must be properly described in a grant application whether there are visits or not.

The State Trails Council sometimes schedules their meetings at a location with the intent of visiting a trail or trail related facility to see first-hand what is being done.

Some points that illustrate the value of visits of this type:

- a. Additional information is never bad. It often compliments what is described in a grant request providing a clearer picture of the situation to be dealt with.
- b. Visits allow members to compare what is requested relative to their observations and experiences from across the country, state, and the specific trail location.
- c. Visits allow council members to develop knowledge about how well applications are accurately describing the actual needs involved in a request. This can allow members to suggest remedies or improvements to the application process that will best serve all involved.
- d. Although the council is not directing members to make site visits as a council action at this time, the council does not discourage members from making visits on their own.
- e. The council will evaluate information derived from these visits just as they evaluate other information involved in the process.
- f. Council members are required to know about trails. They need to be out there looking at things.
- g. Visiting sites related to grant applications can also be valuable after the grant has been executed. This serves as important feedback for the council to see that the work was completed as described in the application and assessing if the action was effective in addressing the need. It is important for the council to get information that allows them to determine that what we are funding actually works as projected.

Resolved

In view of the foregoing, it is clear that council members sharing information about trails and sites they visit can be valuable to both grant applicants and the council. Not only is it unmistakably permissible, but it should be encouraged by the community we serve.