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The council has continued to find ways to improve the grant process to ensure that the program and the customers are best served.

As an example, the council developed a pre-funding meeting about a month prior to the funding meeting to review grant applications. The purpose was to provide the opportunity for grant applicants to respond to questions that might clarify their application and improve their chances of success. A poorly prepared application could prevent an otherwise appropriate grant request from being approved.

Another step the council took was to visit some grant application sites to do an on the ground evaluation of the grant request. We recognize that it is difficult to capture the myriad of factors at a location that are involved in a proposed project without a visit. It has proven to be very valuable to the council to make these visits and have the benefit of additional photos and information derived therefrom.

Informed council members are able to interpret conditions and proposed actions at the grant site. They have the benefit of a state-wide perspective regarding grants previously reviewed or under current review at the time of the visit. They have a valuable awareness of priorities and how the requested actions might be evaluated in that light. They have the wisdom of experience riding a variety of trails throughout the state and beyond. Those with formal trail training can apply their knowledge as it relates to the proposal.

Previously some grants were denied largely based on these visits saving the program a lot of unnecessary expense. Sometimes what was portrayed in the grant application did not reflect the conditions personally observed by a council member on the ground. In other cases, the additional photographs, information, and recommendations of a council member(s) that visited a grant site resulted in approval of a grant that might otherwise have been denied.

Sometimes it is relevant to a grant request to visit nearby areas that are outside of the specific grant site. An example is to examine a section of trail that was previously replenished with gravel to compare it to a request for replenishment to see the value of what was previously done.

We are also seeing the need to do more to evaluate user experience preferences with regard to work being proposed by a grant request.

We also know that not all grant requests require a site visit. Many are well documented, otherwise obvious, or otherwise known to the council. We visit those that require an in-person evaluation because of the nature or scale of the work or because the grant application doesn't tell the story. For example, typical concrete caps on railroad bridges usually require no visit since photos are pretty straight forward. A trail "that can no longer be graded" (whatever that means) certainly needs a high end evaluation weighed against council wisdom and perspective. Judgements about adding gravel often require a council member visit.

With the potential advent of new and potentially conflicting trail construction and maintenance guidance, it will be more important than ever to have a program in place for council members to visit sites and interpret the totality of circumstances on the ground so we don't undertake projects that are not needed, overbuilt, a waste of resources, or of little value to the ATV/UTV program.

We've already seen the dollar savings in the program that resulted from visits to grant sites that revealed the proposed work was not required. What can't be measured is the number of inappropriate grant requests that never came into being because of the knowledge that proposal would be evaluated in-person. In view of this, a small amount of spending to cover ORVC member's actual costs is an economical course of action that best serves the program.

Over the past few years, we have essentially had a trial program with council member volunteers bearing the expenses. This trial has conclusively demonstrated the value to the program.

First, taking this step formalizes grant visits as an essential part of the program. Second, it isn't fair to reap the benefits of council member visits without reimbursing the authorized costs of making the visits.

Wisconsin statute 15.09(6) states that "members of a council shall not be compensated for their services, but, except as otherwise provided in this subsection, members of councils created by statute shall be reimbursed for their actual and necessary expenses incurred in the performance of their duties . . ."

It would be important to establish a procedure to manage this program to ensure efficiency and appropriate controls.

Components of this program might include:

1. Coordination/authorization for funded site visits through the council Chairman and/or DNR program rep. This prevents unnecessary duplication of funded visits. The council members planning visits would have to prepare an outline of their planned visits for review and approval. This ensures that we are making the best use of resources in conducting an appropriate number of appropriate site visits per trip.
2. A travel voucher would document that actual travel that was done. It may be appropriate to edit the proposed outline after the trip so that it reflects what actually happened during the trip so that others could potentially pick up anything that was missed.
3. The member that makes a visit would be required to present photographs and enter into a discussion about their observations during the visit with the remainder of the council and grant requestors during the funding meeting. We do not want to write written reports and recommendations and present them to the council prior to the funding meeting. The best way is to present the photographs and engage in the discussion at the meeting and in the presence of all those with an interest in the grant. Reporting and recommending to fellow council members outside the public eye can lead some to believe we are making decisions prior to the funding meeting. Best to avoid that completely.

There will be cases where members will visit grant sites either inadvertently or in the course of otherwise pursuing their recreational interests. There is no intent to reimburse members for expenses that are intended as part of their recreational riding. Members can still take photographs and make a presentation of their visit to a site even if it is not otherwise funded by the program.

It could also be possible that a council member might be doing recreation riding in a certain area already, but would be willing to travel a bit further to make site visits. For instance, someone might be riding in Oconto County. There may be several grant requests in Florence and Marinette Counties that require a visit. It would offer savings to the program if the member took a reimbursed side trip to make

the grant visits from his recreation ride in Oconto County. The more expensive alternative would be to make a separate trip starting from home at another time. Better to take advantage of being much of the way there already and simply reimbursing for additional costs.

Although a council member can't be reimbursed for time, it would be possible to reimburse for vehicle miles, ATV/UTV miles, meals, and required lodging in accordance with state rates. At one time someone said "well, they ought to at least get mileage". If this is a legitimate and valuable activity in support of the council, those that participate under the established procedures should be reimbursed for actual expenses as the law allows.

The best course of action in dealing with grants is to examine an individual request and the situation on the ground to evaluate all of the factors involved. This does not rely on a rigid trail "standard" but instead relies on wisdom and judgement to apply trail construction and maintenance references, experience, and the circumstances involved in each situation to arrive at the best course of action with regard to a request. Something like a trail "standard" that is more rigid than the flexibility required in this process will detract from the program, open it to abuse, and lead to a potential waste of resources that does not properly account for rider preferences. This is one of the reasons it is important to make site visits.

One of the most important elements in managing resources and the desired rider experience is the process of using the ORV Council to review grant requests. One of the best enhancements to that process is making use of site visits by council members. The council can take in the myriad of factors that don't relate to a broad cook book guideline because they can closely examine the elements involved that are particular to the specific situation at hand. The council can also make judgements as to the validity of some of the assertions contained in a grant request. It is well known that money can sometimes drive people to unethical behavior. There is no checklist stock reference that can replace the necessary judgement. The ability to apply the wisdom and perspective from state-wide experiences and to balance requests against available resources is important. It would be unfair to all grant requestors to spend money on a request that is not an accurate representation of need. Funded site visits are key to best serving the program.