

NRIS Advisory Committee Meeting
May 23, 2000
Fish, Wildlife and Parks Conference Room

ATTENDANCE (Committee Members): Dan Sullivan, Montana Dept. of Agriculture; Todd Everts, Montana Legislative Environmental Policy Office; Bonnie Lovelace, MT Dept. of Environmental Quality; Janet Hess Herbert, MT Dept. of Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Wayne Wetzel, Montana Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation; Stan Sternberg, Montana Dept. of Transportation; Joyce A. Scott, Office of the Commission of Higher Education; Duane Anderson, Natural Resource Information System

ATTENDANCE (Other Interested Parties): Pam Smith, Natural Resource Information System; Jane Horton, MT Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation; Cathy Maynard, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service.

WELCOME and INTRODUCTIONS:

Bonnie Lovelace, chair of the NRIS Advisory Committee, welcomed everyone to the meeting. Introductions were made around the table.

Update and Discussion:

Anderson reported that the Montana State Library Commission approved the NRIS Strategic Plan, with the exception of the Reduction-in-Force(RIF) of two GIS programmer/analysts. The grade 17 GIS coordinator resigned in this time period. The interim management subcommittee made recommendations to the Library Commission to proceed with the recruitment and hiring of a Director as soon as possible and to leave the Strategic Plan management structure in place, with the caveat that the second Grade 17 position be filled only after the new Director is in place, and the management issues are reexamined. The Director's position is to be advertised with a salary range.

Anderson reported with the resignation of two GIS programmer/analysts, and the half time GIS Programmer Analyst accepting a full time job, the Library Commission decided the RIF was no longer necessary.

Lovelace asked the group how they wanted to proceed. She said that she has had numerous phone calls and visitors to her office in regards to NRIS needs. Discussion then took place.

Anderson commented that the belief is out there that NRIS is getting out of GIS, but the truth is that technology has demanded a refocusing on Web mapping efforts. The need is still there for cartographic products, actually an increased role is outlined in the strategic plan.

Baumler asked what the role of the Advisory Committee is on management issues. He stated that he is more concerned with what NRIS does rather than who does it.

Anderson commented that NRIS needs advice on activities and functions of the program and not

management.

Maynard commented that it is difficult to address management issues without addressing staffing issues. The overall GIS coordination has changed. The Program needs to pay attention to staffing issues and project management.

Sternberg asked what the management subcommittee meant by the phrase “strong director”. Lovelace replied that she thinks the committee means a strong manager vs. a technical person.

Hess-Herbert stated that she is very concerned that the pay range be high enough to draw candidates. The initial advertisement did NOT include salary range. Since this was a strong recommendation of the subcommittee, she sees it as a poor beginning to bring NRIS back up to speed and was concerned about library management oversight.

Horton stated that as an interested party/consumer that her two main concerns are that of NRIS’ Strategic Plan eliminating Arcview training and Metadata support. She is also concerned with lack of technical support. Anderson replied that training in use of ArcView will no longer be done. NRIS will continue to provide technical support for use of its products and will provide technical support for ArcView users.

Lovelace asked if technical support should be a formalized support function of NRIS. NRIS needs core funded staff for the broad range of requests.

Discussion on the metadata position then took place. Horton asked if there was enough staff to actually support the strategic plan. Anderson answered that metadata support was not part of the plan. Horton then asked if the Library hadn’t been directed by MGIC to support metadata. Anderson answered that NRIS produces metadata for all its data, however it is not a function of the program to provide training in developing metadata. Hess-Herbert asked if the Strategic Plan specifically stated that the metadata position will not be funded. Anderson answered that as part of outreach, NRIS will teach the importance of metadata and that a web page could be developed on metadata tools and how to use them. However, each agency will be responsible for their own metadata development and training. Maynard asked if she could contribute funding to metadata training as part of the NRCS contract. Anderson said it is unlikely that this position could be supported by adding more overhead to existing or new contracts. Maynard asked if that position is open to redefinition or if the FTE would be eliminated. Anderson stated that one third of the staff has resigned and this question cannot be answered at this time, since all the changes were so new. He said that he would like to see the program hire temporary staff as needed for contracts, if more staff were needed.

Crispin told the group that hiring an effective manager that is strong in outreach is imperative. The program also needs to take a strategic focus.

Lovelace asked Smith for any comments that she would like to make. Smith stated her opinion that a strong NRIS Director is needed and that the error made in the advertisement on salary range might have been critical. Also, she stated that she thinks the NRIS Advisory group should play an active role in the NRIS Director’s selection and that the group should help develop the

selection criteria for a new Director.

Hess-Herbert commented that there was discussion by the subcommittee that the two grade 16 programmer/analysts could take more of a role in project management. A certain percentage of their position description has project management duties in it already. With respect to NRIS programmer/analysts, she suggested that if her contract required additional hires, she would discuss with the NRIS Director the pros and cons of using NRIS staff or hiring through FWP. Maynard commented that she is in a different position than Hess-Herbert in that her agency is in a hiring freeze and she cannot hire additional staff. NRIS needs to fulfill her contract needs.

Maynard stated that NRIS is operating in a crisis mode at the moment and crossing the line of management issues is not the point. The NRIS Advisory Committee needs to help with decisions in the absence of a Director and it may be a while before a Director is hired. What develops in the next six months affects her funding relationship with NRIS.

Sullivan stated that the perception in out there that NRIS is being degraded. It is not the truth, but the perception is sometimes the reality. He thinks it is important that the perceptions be changed.

Everts had no specific comment.

Crispin stated that the Heritage program prioritized activities in their strategic plan a year ago. Two activities that did not fall within the strategic plan priorities were the maintenance of the Bird Distribution database and the Stewardship layer. The Bird Distribution database was given to the Audubon Society for maintenance. It was decided that maintenance of the Stewardship layer would require additional funding which is now being pursued. These transitions were made with the help of partnerships to ensure that important activities continue to get done. Given time, NRIS' change in priorities could play out the same way.

Lovelace stated that she feels the Advisory Committee needs further direction from Strege. She feels a discomfort in slipping outside the bounds of the Committee, but realizes that concerns and issues are out there.

NRIS Director Hiring Process

Lovelace asked Duane for an update on the Director hiring. He said that Karen wanted to wait to give the Advisory Committee an update after the position had closed.

Everts asked what the decision process was for posting the salary. Anderson stated that the error was corrected within the first week and that it was water under the bridge. Hess-Herbert replied that if it was an oversight it was one thing, but if it was disregard for the subcommittee's recommendation it was another. She asked if the position could get an IT pay exception or if the agency can prove it's a difficult hire and then hire at a higher grade level. Anderson responded that the larger issue is that the State Librarian is only a grade 19 and the Director's position cannot be higher than that of the State Librarian.

Lovelace asked the Committee if anyone had been asked to serve on the screening committee or on the interview committee for the NRIS Director. No one has yet been asked.

Baumler stated that he thinks the Advisory Committee should not participate in the hiring process.

Everts disagreed. He stated that the NRIS program is about building relationships. He said that it is not unprecedented for an advisory group to assist in a hiring process. It makes it a better process. It is an opportunity for the library to be inclusive and build partnerships and should not be viewed as micro-managing. Anderson replied that "we will make it happen." Baumler asked who the person/persons selected to participate would be representing. Everts replied - "the Committee" - the representative could carry any of the Committee's issues to the table. Sternberg asked if there would be an NRIS staff person on the interview committee. Anderson replied that there would be some component of that. Sternberg stated that the staff seems uneasy and they should be given a buy-in to the process. At least one staff member should be on the interview committee.

Hess-Herbert recommended that the Advisory Committee suggest to Strege that an NRIS staff person and an Advisory Committee member be on the hiring committee. Crispin stated that one of the main things the Committee could do at this point, is actively recruit for the Director's position- encourage good people to apply.

Discussion took place on whether the Director's position could receive the IT pay exception to elevate the salary. Crispin told the Committee that she understood there has in the past been an equity issue within the Library with NRIS salaries. Because the Library is a small agency, equity issues are important.

Heritage Integration

Crispin explained the attached memo to the group. It is a memo outlining a process to integrate NRIS/Heritage functions. She reiterated the objectives set forth in the memo. She discussed the practical outcomes of the objectives would be that NRIS/Heritage would work better as a team and share expertise. New hires and projects will be reviewed for integration. Contracts need to be revisited to make it easier to pass money back and forth between the programs. She stated that the larger issue is the Heritage contract - is it an advantage or an impediment? She said something to consider as a long-term goal is to move toward making Heritage employees state employees.

Discussion then took place on the Heritage contract and how it relates to the NRIS program. It was stated that it is confusing to have to have two different contracts with basically the same program for outside agencies. Everts said his stated concern at the last meeting was that Heritage and NRIS had two separate Strategic Plans, with neither one referring to the other.

Fiscal Report

Anderson gave the Committee a brief report on NRIS's fiscal state. He stated that the resignations have eased the Program's budget crisis. He reported that DEQ committed \$50,000 of core support to the program at the beginning of the Fiscal Year and NRIS has only received \$30,000 to date. DEQ has told NRIS that they will not receive the final \$20,000. NRIS is now on 95% contract money until the end of the Fiscal Year.

Discussion then took place on the budget. Lovelace told the Committee that DEQ currently has close to \$400,000 in contracts with NRIS, besides the core money it has already paid.

Anderson stated that even through the EPP process, any funds committed by DEQ are federal grants and contracts and NRIS would be dependent on those funds coming through. Horton asked if it isn't more practical to get General Fund money instead of depending on source agencies. Anderson replied that the initial feedback to the EPP proposals from the Governor's Budget Office was not good. The Library has not heard an update from the Budget Office recently.

Lovelace asked Everts if he had investigated whether NRIS could go before the Natural Resource Committee instead of the Library's Education committee. Everts explained that NRIS cannot be split from the agency's budget. An alternative would be to have NRIS appear before the Natural Resource Committee and then the Natural Resource Committee would make a recommendation to the Education Committee. This alternative would require that the heads of the two committees meet and make a facilitated decision. Everts also expressed his opinion that NRIS should obtain support letters from all aspects of the clients they serve.

Discussion then took place on prioritization of contracts: Anderson stated that given the present budget situation that NRIS would accept any contracts right now. If the Program gets the money it has requested through the EPP process, a contract acceptance policy would need to be established. The question was asked what filters would be used to select the contracts NRIS accepted. Crispin told the Committee that the Strategic Plan's highest priorities would be to build data layers of statewide benefit; project agreements that are longer term, and for larger amounts of money. The other objective that would need to be met is that of building partnerships. An example she used was that of building a partnership with OPI to help provide service to schools and students. Maynard made the point that there is money available from different sources. Lovelace stated that the Advisory Committee should follow up with the criteria developed for filtering contracts.

Role of the Advisory Committee

Hess-Herbert distributed copies of the 1997 document outlining proposed revisions to the Advisory Committee operations and procedures. Discussion took place on who the source agencies to the Committee are by law. It was determined that the source agencies are: the Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation, Dept. of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Dept. of Environmental Quality, Dept. of Transportation, the Dept. of Agriculture, the Historical Society, and the University System. Besides the source agencies, the Environmental Quality Council and the State Library are also established by law to be on the Committee.

Wetzel commented that the role of the Committee has evolved from advising on types of data to advising on funding issues. Maynard stated that there should be a voting federal representative on the Committee. Wetzel suggested that Strege attend the Natural Resource subcommittee meetings held with the Governor and heads of Natural Resource agencies.

Baumler asked for clarification as to why the Historical Society was on the Advisory Committee. Hess-Herbert replied that it was a spin-off of the Montana Rivers Study and the cultural database attached to it. Baumler then commented that ISD is marketing itself as the cultural GIS provider for the state and this could possibly take funding away from the NRIS program.

Discussion took place on changing the composition of the Advisory committee. Crispin stated that the group may consider adding a member from a politically influential sector. Someone who may lend influence in the political realm, or that the Library develop this kind of support at another level rather than through the Committee. She also again stated the importance of hiring a strong NRIS Director as leader as it is primarily the Director's job to build that support.

Discussion then took place on the role the Advisory committee plays. Crispin suggested asking Strege the type of support that she would want from the Committee. Hess-Herbert stated her concerns of the dichotomy of the situation of the NRIS program in the Library. The Library is a small non-natural resource agency and it is essential that the Committee advise from a natural resource standpoint. She also stated that the Committee could play a greater role in hiring and strategic planning for NRIS.

Everts stated that the Committee's role should be to provide multi-dimensional support to NRIS. The new Director needs to elevate the Advisory Committee to the political realm.

Hess-Herbert then made a motion that the Committee implement the changes in the Advisory Committee's role that were approved by the Advisory Committee in November 1997. Lovelace will check with Strege on the status of the changes.

Everts stated that an agenda item for the next meeting would be whether to add a Federal representative to the Committee.

Lovelace established that the next meeting would be held within a month of the hire of a new Director, possibly sometime in August.