

THE VALUE OF PUBLIC-NONPROFIT PARTNERSHIPS

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I have worked with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, St. Louis District for just over 1.5 years and have already learned a lot about the value of our public-nonprofit partnerships. Our local cooperating association, the Meeting of the Rivers Foundation (MTRF) was formed in 2003 to develop a capital campaign for exhibit installation at the National Great Rivers Museum (NGRM) in Alton, Illinois. Without this joint effort between the Corps and Foundation, timelines would have elongated and operational efficiency may have decreased.

In a 2002 article by Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff¹, they argue that government – nonprofit partnerships typically arrive from failures in each sector. I would disagree and put a positive spin on the relationships established by these partnerships. Often times, partnerships come about due to an opportunity, not a failure. Many times, each organization could function solo, but the impact made through the combination acts as a function multiplier. For example, the Corps of Engineers, through its dedicated ranger staff, is very capable of developing and coordinating outreach programs. However, with the added support of a local nonprofit organization, the power to reach more people and supply better information through a better product is well worth the collaborative efforts.

CHALLENGES FACED

One of the most significant challenges facing a volunteer board is finding the time to accomplish key tasks. All of the Foundation's board members have full-time jobs that require a lot of their professional and sometimes personal time. Asking more of these members often comes down to large-ticket items that don't need much time investment, but have large returns. The board members become proponents for initiatives rather than actually getting their hands in a program or special event. They are the figure-heads to promote the cause, rather than actively participating.

A second challenge faced is financial stability. This is within both parties. Although the Corps is a federal government agency, the budget for education and recreation is based on quantitative information from several fiscal years prior. This is difficult to measure as education and recreation programs are often based on qualitative experiences rather than quantitative figures. How to gauge the qualitative experiences and convert them into quantitative values requires a team-effort. This is where the input of our Foundation Board and members of the Corps' staff provide the program multiplier previously referenced.

CHALLENGES BEING MET

Although time and dedication are a challenge, this has been met through the determination of staff and the constant contact with the board and its members. Staff regularly initiate conversations and request feedback from the Foundation board. When projects come to a decision-point, board members and staff work together to determine the best course of action forward.

The Foundation enables an additional layer of program support through its financial support and marketing capabilities. While not hugely substantial, the monetary support multiplies the participant's experience and provides positive feedback and public support for these joint public/non-profit programs and events. The Foundation is actively pursuing fundraising opportunities to maintain and increase its support over the next several years.

MOVING FORWARD

The Board will gain new members this fall and will be working closely with Corps staff on the museum exhibit plan update in preparation for the National Great Rivers Museum's 10th anniversary celebration. Fundraisers are also in the works to gain monetary and "friend" support for the joint Corps-Foundation programs and events.

I look forward to continue working with the Meeting of the Rivers Foundation, and we will push each other to be better and accomplish more. The power of a well-rounded Board, in conjunction with dedicated Corps staff will facilitate a sustainable partnership leading many years into the future.

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1. Brinkerhoff, Jennifer M. and Derick W. Brinkerhoff. 2002. *Government-Nonprofit Relations in Comparative Perspective: Evolution, Themes and New Directions*. School of Business and Public Management, George Washington University, Washington, DC.