MEMORANDUM FOR FILE   31 January 2002

Subject: Visitor Center Initiative (VCI) Committee In Progress Review Meeting, 10-11 January 2002

1. **Attendees:**

> Darrell Lewis* (CECW-ON)
> Steve Austin* (CECW-ON)
> Dave Hewitt* (CECW-PA
> Paul Walker* (CECW-HO)
> Judy Rice* (CECW-ON)
> Joe Bertolini (LRL)
> Greg Miller (NWK)
> Jim Pennaz (POH)
> Nancy Rogers (SPD)
> Matt Seavey (SWF)
> Debra Stokes (MVN)
> Mark Wade (SAS)
> John Veverka*, John Veverka & Associates
> Wendy Meluch*, Visitor Studies Services
> Bruce Thornton (SAM)
>
> *Part time attendees (Steering Committee)

2. **General Discussion** - On 10 and 11 January 2002 the Visitor Center Initiative Team met in Washington, D.C. The purpose of the meeting was to evaluate data gathered from various studies and provide a status report of the VCI Team's progress to the HQ Oversight Committee. The agenda for this meeting is provided as Attachment 1. The reports referenced in the following paragraphs are being posted on the Visitor Center Gateway. The Team's goal is to have this information posting on the Gateway by the end of February 2002.

3. **Visitor Center Manager's Survey** – In June 2001 the Team contracted with Ms. Wendy Meluch, Visitor Studies Services, to assist in the development of a user survey for visitor center managers and to analyze and report survey results. The intent of the survey was to:

Assess current condition of Visitor Center Facilities, programs and operations.
Assess relevancy of current interpretive themes, media and presentations found throughout the Corps' visitor centers.
Determine level and extent of needed upgrades and remodeling at Corps visitor centers.
Determine institutional or other barriers to improvement of the Corps' Visitor Center Program
Solicit field-level input on future management strategies for Corps visitor centers.

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Approximately 115 individual Visitor Center managers were identified to participate in the web-based survey. During June and July of 2001, 95 managers responded. A response rate of 70% was received on the survey which is considered very good for surveys. Technical difficulties resulted in the loss of data from several questions. Since feedback on these questions was important, four text questions were e-mailed to the survey audience in August. Fifty responses were received from the e-mail request. Survey responses were evaluated and consolidated responses prepared and are presented below.

A. Assess current condition of Visitor Center facilities, programs and operations.

Apart from exhibits, almost all physical aspects of these Visitor Center facilities were judged by respondents to be "fair" or better. Among the most favorably rated were Staffed Welcome Station, Restrooms, Heating and Air Conditioning, and Condition of Building. Those features with significant negative ratings include office space, public meeting space, vending and sales/bookstore space.

Programs are addressed primarily in the context of Visitor Centers partnering with outside agencies. For those Visitor Centers which do have partners, several benefit from program input. Partner relationships may be helpful to those Visitor Center managers who mention wanting to have a larger role in their local communities. Impediments to partnering include limited resources, remote locations and outdated or cumbersome Corps policies and regulations.

Numerous responses throughout the survey touch on problems with operations. Concerns range from relatively simple issues of communication to annual budgeting procedures that make long term exhibit planning impossible and to how the Corps perceives Visitor Centers. Please see comments on Goals 4 and 5 below.

B. Assess relevancy of current interpretive themes, media and presentations found throughout the Corps Visitor Centers.

Both managers and visitors stress the importance of interpreting "Site-specific Project Purposes" and "Physical Orientation to the Site (way finding)." In addition, visitors are believed to want information on "Recreation." "The Corps' Missions" and "The History of the Corps" fall into a mid range of interest for managers and the lowest level of interest for visitors. Should the Committee pursue a Corps-focused exhibit for installation in numerous Visitor Centers, care should be taken to allow customization of it so it can be integrated properly into existing exhibits on site.

Other interpretive interests that are valued by managers and visitors include issues germane to the local area and community including local history, community events, activities,

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environment and the like. Note that managers are reporting on visitor interests based primarily on informal input from visitors. A survey of visitors was not done as a part of this effort.

Very few visitor center managers report that their exhibits are built around a single, central theme. Many cite a list of subject areas addressed by exhibitry. Current exhibit development practice revolves around identifying and supporting a single "big idea."

Less than half of respondents state that their facility has computer-based interactives among exhibits. Many comments throughout the survey reveal that managers have a need for improved computer-based exhibitry as well as expertise.

Exhibits geared for children are present in a majority of participating Visitor Centers, but less than half of those are felt by managers to be adequate. Exhibits are mostly inaccessible according to guidelines of Universal Design.

As it plans for exhibit renovations throughout the Corps, the Visitor Center Initiative Committee should consider further visitor research studies. Front-end evaluations with visitors, for example, can guide exhibit development from the outset. Front-end and formative evaluation studies are instrumental in helping exhibit developers avoid costly mistakes while helping to ensure an effective exhibit.

C. Determine level and extent of needed upgrades and remodeling at Corps Visitor Centers.

Managers report a need for vast amounts of exhibit renovations. Many of them feel that over 80%, even 100%, of exhibit areas need renovation. By far the two most common reasons for updating exhibits were "Broken/maintenance problem" and "Obsolete computer technology." Much more information about the type of updating or new exhibit creation, and the estimated square footage is needed to estimate costs.

Remodeling and upgrading of other aspects of Visitor Center buildings is needed, according to respondents, but to a somewhat lesser degree. Office space, vending space and public meeting space are lacking or very limited in several participating facilities. Many also commented on the dated look of the buildings and appointments.

D. Determine institutional or other barriers to improvement of the Corps' Visitor Center Program.

and

E. Solicit field-level input on future management strategies for Corps Visitor Centers.

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The most frequently cited barrier to improving Visitor Centers is that of budgetary constraints. In addition to higher levels of funding and other resources, Visitor Centers would benefit from procurement and budgeting procedures that reflect the nature of Visitor Center management, i.e., planning for new exhibits that often requires a multi-year approach.

While nearly all managers report a lack of resources (time, staff, funding and space) a few blame this lack on the apparent low standing of Visitor Centers in the eyes of Corps management. Many respondents want upper management to recognize the value of Visitor Centers as the public face of the Corps. Responses cite unsupportive districts, lack of respect for the Visitor Center mission, and lack of awareness or acknowledgement of interpretive staff as professionals. Real support from the Corps in terms of communication, funding and other resources, programs and partnering will improve Visitor Center staffs' ability to function both by facilitating their efforts and boosting morale.

Increased communication between Visitor Center managers and upper management could improve the future of the program. Managers want to know what has succeeded at other Visitor Centers, especially in terms of exhibits and partnerships but have no formal channel to disseminate information. A regularly scheduled Visitor Center conference was suggested as a means of doing this.

During her presentation Ms. Meluch also pointed out other important survey findings. They are as follows:

- Subject areas of interest to managers vs. visitors

  - Managers rank Corps story related subject areas more highly than visitors.
  - Managers were responding on behalf of visitors; they feel visitors are not interested in the Corps story topics.
  - Visitors and managers stress under "other" subject areas information about locality: local history, events, activities, etc., not just the local Corps project.
  - Both managers and visitors value information about how to visit the site.

- Exhibit renovation

  - Managers report a need for vast amounts of exhibit renovation or replacement
  - Exhibit development is a multi-year process that does not fit current budgeting process/funding cycles
  - Main reasons for this need: broken and/or obsolete exhibits and technology
  - A number of VC's do have exhibitry for kids but it is largely not satisfactory - remember kids aren't the only ones who want visually exciting and tactile exhibits
  - Most VC's describe poorly developed themes for their exhibits

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- Visitors profiles

  - Most common type of visitors are local (from schools or individuals/family groups)
  - Local visitors have little reason to make repeat visits when exhibits are unchanging
  - Local visitors may also be affected by partnering with local groups and the associated need/use of public space on site

Managers report that they do review visitor input from all channels but frequently cannot implement changes due to limited resources — funds, time, staff and space.

- Partnering

  - Considering how most VC's use/operate with outside partner agencies it is particularly significant that public meeting spaces receive the lowest scores for facilities at participating VC's
  - Partnering is made very difficult by cumbersome and outdated regulations and a lack of OC and other support

- Role of VC's

  - 71 (75%) cite to educate the public about the Corps
  - 68 (72%) cite to support public education system
  - 66 (69%) cite a project based center
  - 50 (53%) cite to serve as a local community-based center

There is much dissatisfaction and resentment re: the perception that upper management does not value the professionalism of interpretive staff at VC's or the VC mission.

- Recommendations re: Role of VCI Team

  - The continued existence of the VCI Team will be very important to VC managers
  - Advocate for the VC program on all fronts: administrative, budgets, procurement, professional career track, etc.
  - Facilitate communication among VC's and between VC and upper management

A copy of this report is being posted on the Visitor Center Gateway.

4. <u>On-site Visitor Center Facility Evaluations</u> – From 12 - 17 August 2001 the Visitor Center Initiative Team visited several Corps and Non-Corps visitor centers in an effort to evaluate and

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observe a number of management and interpretive approaches to visitor center development and management. John Veverka was hired to facilitate and offer outside perspective to the site visits. Mr. Veverka was also charged with developing a Visitor Center Evaluation Strategy (evaluation questionnaire) that the team used for each individual visitor center critique, as well as provide a summary report of the evaluation process.

  A. Centers visited and critiqued by the team are as follows:

      a. Bradford Island Visitor Center (at Bonneville Dam) – COE
      b. Bonneville Navigation Lock Visitor Center – COE
      c. Bonneville Powerhouse #2 – COE
      d. Johnson Ridge Visitor Center (Mt. St. Helen's – USFS)
      e. Coldwater Ridge Visitor Center (Mt. St. Helen's – USFS)
      f. Lake Washington Ship Canal, Chittenden Locks – COE
      g. The Dallas Dam Visitor Center – COE
      h. Willamette Falls Locks – COE
      i. Charles Bingham Forest Learning Center – Weyerhaeuser Corporation
      j. Columbia Gorge Discovery Center – USFS & Wasco County Historical Society

  B. The evaluation instrument

  a. During, and upon completion of the formal site visit/critiquing process it was felt that the evaluation tool did cover all of the subject areas required for conducting a complete assessment of visitor center and exhibit designs. As noted in the Summary Report, after reviewing the evaluation forms completed by individual team members for each of the sites visited, several problems in the critiquing process were noted. The evaluation project was designed to critique:

      (1) The evaluation tool (form) itself.
      (2) The visitor centers we visited.
      (3) The evaluation process.

  Based on the completion of tabulated results from the surveys of all of the visitor center forms, it was noted that there were such variations in the individual critiques by the team members for the "same" center, that the actual visitor center evaluations were non-conclusive. Thus, there was a major problem with the evaluation process itself.

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Common issues defined themselves as we visited a variety of Corps and Non-Corps Visitor Centers:

(1) Corps Visitor Centers lack a central and focused theme. As a result the flow of exhibits was chaotic with an excess of messages.
(2) Corps Visitor Centers suffer from lack of partners to contribute funding, staffing and programming.
(3) Corps Visitor Center exhibits are outdated, broken and the facility maintenance costs/other project priorities prevent funds from being used to renovate exhibits.
(4) Corps Visitor Centers are not responsive to local visitor needs and level of interest even though locals are the predominant visitor group to use Corps facility.
(5) Corps Visitor Centers are largely non-compliant with regard to Principles of Universal Design.
(6) Corps Visitor Centers lack interactive, engaging exhibits that are appropriate for children.

5. Corps Story – Two scopes of work are prepared to facilitate the design, fabrication and installation of a "Corps Story" exhibit at one or more pilot locations. The first scope will provide a design concept that includes theme development. This product will be used to help secure funding. The second scope is written for production and installation of the exhibit as a pilot project.

A. Visitor centers were polled using Interp-Net and asked for examples of "Corps Story" exhibits. The team reviewed several audiovisuals. These will be used with the contractor to demonstrate "likes and dislikes".

B. Concept drawings of the Corps Story exhibit were developed by Design and Production, an IDIQ contractor working on exhibits at Harry S. Truman Reservoir Visitor Center. These were shared with PAO and Visitor Center Initiative team. These drawings will be used to help communicate our design ideas to the design contractor.

C. Visitor Center Initiative team members met with HQ PAO Chief- Carol Sanders and Paul Walker, Office of History to brief them on the "Corps Story" exhibit. Following is a brief summary:

a. A strategic communications plan draft will be finished in 2 months. PAO will ask our group for feedback.

b. Use Strategic vision, Spectrum of USACE Operations for themes in Corps Story exhibit.

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      c. J. M. Waller and Assoc. has contract for 50 news video stories a year. Current affairs news stories can be integrated into the Corps Story to keep exhibits from becoming stagnated. PAO has offered to do new stories that capture our local issues. Video from these stories can also furnish B-role for production of main themes.

      d. Historian Paul Walker has recent tasker related to historical exhibits in project offices. Our team will coordinate with Paul to brief LTG Flowers. Paul Walker will assist in storyline development and may partner on video. He has similar exhibits planned for Ft. Belvoir museum.

      e. The team discussed front-end evaluation (audience analysis) for the Corps Story and decided to hire Ms. Meluch to develop a list of survey questions that will help to plan Corps story exhibit.

6. Visitor Center Gateway – WES has put some preliminary information on the Gateway and information is being sent by VCI members for posting.

- Several suggestions came out of the NAI pre-workshop and these include:

    - A message board for information exchange.

    - A "subscription" option that would automatically notify people when the site has been updated.

    - The possibility of identifying a POC for each visitor center.

    - A search engine to make hunting through the site easier.

    - Ensure that links to NAI, NRPA, AMA, etc. are addressed.

    - We will be coordinating any links and information concerning accessibility with the Accessibility Taskforce (LuAnn Lackey).

    - The full Visitor Center Gateway site is schedule for initial launch in the next two months.

    - Update Gateway site to include information "Good Enough To Share" to facilitate information transfer.

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7.   National Association of Interpreters (NAI) Conference Wo rkshop – On 06 November 2001 members of the Visitor Center Initiative Committee held a focus group meeting with representatives from Corps Lakes and Visitor Centers representatives attending the NAI National Conference in Des Moines, IA. The focus group meeting was held in Pella, IA in conjunction with a tour of Lake Red Rock and Saylorville Lake, COE projects located in the Rock Island District. Twenty-eight Corps employees participated in the focus group session. The group was broken down into four sub-groups. Each sub-group was asked to respond to questions developed by the committee. VCI committee members facilitating the workshops were:

Nancy Rogers
Greg Miller
Debra Stokes
Joe Bertolini

Listed below are the major categories of questions asked within each sub-group:

Validate Team Charter
Visitor Center regulations/publications
Resourcing for Visitor Centers
Training and Field Support

Basically, the workshop feedback validated many of the observations and concerns addressed in the Visitor Center Manager's Survey discussed in Paragraph 3 above. A copy of the NAI report documenting feedback from the breakout sessions is being posted on the Visitor Center Gateway.

8.   Need for User Survey – The VCI Team found the missing element in data collection was user feedback. Therefore, efforts are underway to develop and issue questionnaires that will help determine visitor needs and expectations. Discussion was as follows:

A. Visitor surveys are needed at all visitor centers. They should be conducted before new construction or upgrading existing facilities.

B. We have an opportunity to include visitor survey questions in the triennial submission of civil works questionnaires for generic OMB approval. The current Corps generic approval expires on the 31 March 2002.

C. Consider working survey issues with Don Wadleigh, Chicago District, who is currently preparing an interpretive prospectus for the Chicago Lock.

D. Review current survey questionnaires to see if any are suitable for visitor center.

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E. An out of cycle visitor center survey questionnaire submission to OMB is not feasible due to the time constraints of the VCI charter.

F. The group feels two separate surveys are needed. One for the Corps Story and the other for visitor centers.

After our meeting, steps were taken to incorporate visitor center questions into the Corps' triennial questionnaire submission to OMB by IWR. The lead-time for this submission was extremely short — one week. Questions were due in IWR by 21 January 2002. Nevertheless, a superb effort by the Team resulted in the questions being submitted on time. Scott Jackson, WES, and Stuart Davis, IWR, were also instrumental in getting the questions reviewed and included in the OMB submittal. OMB's response to the questionnaire is not anticipated until March 2002.

9. Summary of Findings and Preliminary Recommendations – On 11 January Darrell Lewis and Steve Austin were briefed on the Team's accomplishments for the preceding year and their preliminary observations and concerns. The following is a listing of those items.

A. Partnering Constraints present barriers to accepting public support in the development and dissemination of information

B. Changes are needed to the budgetary process to place VC's in a role that they can realistically compete for scarce funds.

C. A June/July survey of VC Managers indicated 50% or more of their exhibits needed updating. The main problems were that the exhibits were broken or needed expensive maintenance or they contained obsolete computer technology.

D. Flat or declining funding – suggest fee demonstration projects need to be investigated.

E. Visitor Survey – two types of surveys are needed; first a survey is needed to understand what visitors want to know about the Corps, second a survey is needed to understand visitor needs at each project. The VCI Team recommends development of survey questions that each individual visitor center could use to gain a better understanding of their publics.

F. Career Development Team – suggest job descriptions be developed for the GS-04-12 grades for interpreters/visitor center rangers and managers.

G. Tie the Corps Story into the Strategic Vision elements; water resources, environmental, infrastructure, disasters and war fighting. Higher management needs to acknowledge the important role of Visitor Centers to communicate this Strategic Vision.

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H. Develop methods that permit networking between VC staffs, such as a visitor center bulletin board or message board on the VC Gateway site.

I.   Encourage better networking between PAOs, Offices of History and VCs.

J.   Revise Policy Guidance to introduce partnering and remove VC classifications and replace with VC objectives and the "value added" concept for exhibit costs. Revise Policy Guidance on cost sharing, cooperating associations, and use and implementation of cooperating agreements to fully integrate these programs with VC objectives. Elements must work together as a unified effort, not conflict with each other as they do now.

K. Develop a "How to" manual for VC staffs to help them walk through the various processes involved in the development of visitor center exhibit and place on the VC Gateway site.

L.   Lack of Training for VC Managers and staffs. Develop exportable interpretive training for temporaries, volunteers, and new Corps personnel (similar to the Safe-Self course. Look at U of Calgary's 5hr training for interpreters for ideas?). Additional training requested by VC Managers is A/V Multi-media Technology, Program and Exhibit Evaluation and Exhibit Plans and RFP's. Discussion included the development of an Advanced Interpretive Services course to cover these specific training objectives.

M. Develop vision statement for VC to define what their roles (importance as a "corporate asset") should be for the dissemination of Corps information and serving as an integral part of the community it serves.

N. Consider establishing an advisory group (or Masters program similar to the Forest Service program) that could respond to project requests for assistance. The members of the advisory group could function as technical exhibit experts and provide support on an as requested basis.

O. VC managers and staffs are very dedicated and deliver high quality services to the public but they are becoming over burdened with non-VC tasks. These tasks are hindering them from effectively maintain facilities and providing quality serve the public.

P. Corps Visitor Centers lack a central and focused theme. As a result, the visitor flow pattern was chaotic and contained excess of messages.

Q. Corps Visitor Centers lack partners that can contribute funding, staffing and programming.

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R. A large number of Corps Visitor Center exhibits were outdated and/or broken. This is a result of limited funds and budget competition. Since exhibits receive low budget priority, facility maintenance costs and other project priorities deplete available funds before exhibit renovation reaches funding priority levels.

S. Corps Visitor Centers are not responsive to local visitor needs and interest even though locals are the predominant visitor group.

T. Corps Visitor Centers are largely non-compliant with regard to Principles of Universal Design.

U. Corps Visitor Centers lack interactive, engaging exhibits that are appropriate for children.

V. Corps Visitor Centers are not responsive to bilingual audiences.

10. Schedules, Costs Estimates and Prioritized Efforts for FY 2002 – The Team's work has progressed to the point that we can begin working on the development of preliminary recommendations and a report of findings. However, the Team feels very strongly that there are several issues that still need additional work. Of the original $250,000 allocated, approximately $70,000 is available for additional task. Our attention is now focused on prioritizing tasks, preparing cost estimates and schedules for those items we feel are critical for the VCI Team to complete if additional funding is not available. Of these tasks we feel it essential to complete user visitor surveys for the Corps Story and the survey form for individual visitors centers. We are also investigating possible contract opportunities to develop the Corps Story Outline. And, when OMB approves the visitor center survey questionnaire, we will have a user survey conducted and its results incorporated into the Corps Story Outline.

There is tremendous support and a demonstrated need throughout the Corps to revamp the Visitor Center Program to make it more responsive to visitor needs and to empower visitor center managers to better manage their facilities. Based on the information provided in this report, the VCI Team anticipates focusing on the items listed below during the current FY, as funds permit. It is also recommendation that additional funds be provided to continue the Team's work.

A. Develop Corp Story Outline

B. Conduct user survey and analyze feedback for Corps Story.

C. Review/markup Visitor Center regulations

D. Develop Report of Findings and Recommendations

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    E. Conduct Wrap-up VCI Meeting

11. <u>Adjourn</u> – The meeting was very productive and clearly illustrated the Team's dedication and determination to improve the Visitor Center Program. Findings clearly indicate a need for major changes in the Corps' Visitor Center Program. Visitor Center's cannot be an effective Corps communication tool and respond to visitor needs unless the program is permitted to compete, on an equal basis, for Corps resources.

If funds are available, the Team anticipates another meeting later this year to finalize their findings and formalize recommendations. The meeting adjourned on 11 January 2002 at noon.

                                    R. Bruce Thornton
                                    Chair, Visitor Center Initiative Team

Attachment 1
Visitor Center Initiative
10-11 January 2002

Time	Presenter	Topic
10 January 2002		
0830 – 0945	Nancy Rogers Wendy Meluch	Visitor Center Manager Survey
0945 – 1000	BREAK	
1000 – 1115	Greg Miller	Corps Story
1115 – 1215	LUNCH	
1215 - 1330	Debra Stokes John Veverka	On-site VC Facility Evaluations
1330 – 1415	Debra Stokes	VC Gateway
1415 – 1430	BREAK	
1430 – 1545	Joe Bertolini	NAI Conference Workshop Feedback
1445 – 1700	Matt Seavey Mark Wade Jim Pennaz Nancy Rogers	User Survey Pros/Cons
1700	ADJOURN	
11 January 2002		
0830 - 1200	Bruce Thornton	VCI Program Execution Program Strengths Program Weaknesses Recommendations Suggested ER & EC 1130-2-550 dated 15 Nov 96 and EM 1110-1-400 dated 31 Jul 87 Revisions Taskers and schedules
1200	ADJOURN	