

NRIS Advisory Committee Meeting December 8, 2000

Attendance:

Bonnie Lovelace, DEQ; Wayne Wetzel, DNRC; Janet Hess-Herbert, FWP; Stan Sternberg, DOT; Dan Sullivan, Ag; Mark Baumler, Historical Society; Dean Coldwell, Westech; Gerry Gerbance, L & C County Planning; Sue Crispin, NHP; Jim Hill, NRIS; Duane Anderson, NRIS; Katrina Scheuerman, NRIS;

Introductions:

Lovelace, chair of the committee, welcomed everyone to the meeting. Introductions were made around the table. People were asked if they planned on being on this committee for the future. All in attendance felt that they would be here. Jim Hill, the new director of NRIS, gave a detailed introduction.

NRIS Status:

Hill wanted to get the message out that NRIS is "alive and well" and the program hasn't lost a lot over the past several months. Hill went on to describe the newly filled positions at NRIS as well as vacant ones:

System administrator-a 50/50 shared position with Statewide Library Resources; this position was filled by Mike Carrol, who has been an NRIS temp in the past, worked for TRW, and is now back with NRIS.

Information systems tech-this position, filled by Katrina Scheuerman, was Pam Smith's old position, with many changes. It is now only 25% administrative, leaving 75% for other projects. The remaining administrative duties have been taken on by the folks of library centralized services.

GIS Programmer Analyst-TJ Abbenhaus was hired for this interactive database/web development position. He comes to NRIS from Missoula.

Web master-This is a vacant position that will be shared 50/50 with Statewide Library Resources. A qualified applicant has not been found for this position. It is a grade 15 position, and NRIS is looking for someone with interface development experience, database and web development experience, as well as server experience. Mike Carrol will put some time into it and NRIS may contract, it is still up in the air.

GIS Coordinator-This position was kept open until a new director was hired. Now that Hill is here, NRIS is ready to move on with that position. The job description will need to be rewritten.

NRIS has 10 FTE right now and does not want to go below that amount. The Metadata contract with ISD ends June 30, 2001, so something needs to be done there.

Lovelace suggested finding mechanisms to bring some money in from each contract to pay for the Metadata position.

Hill mentioned that NRIS is looking at dropping the Metadata position to ½ time to ease the transition. There is less need for this type of outreach, but it still needs some pushing to make sure that metadata takes place. NRIS is working with ISD to stretch out the contract.

Hess-Herbert asked about the funding and Hill stated that if the FTE goes away, funding from ISD also goes away. Hill also mentioned that this position is funded fully by contract and is not built into the Core budget. There is a lack of stable funding.

Lovelace suggested that maybe NRIS could use the Metadata person for other positions/work that are available. Hill replied saying that is a good possibility.

Anderson feels that to make NRIS more competitive for contracting would be to reduce overhead, try to change positions for less overhead expenses.

Budget Status:

Hill told the group that core funding is much better than it has been in the past, but is below where it could be.

Contracts:

Anderson gave a summary of the current contract activities and went over the "Current active contracts at NRIS for FY 2001" handout. He mentioned that the reality of the contracts is either NRIS doesn't use all the hours or they end up carrying over or renewing the contract. Anderson also mentioned that there might be a couple of new DEQ contracts soon.

Hill added that many of the contracts end in June 2001, so NRIS is always looking ahead for projects. He described management of so many contracts is difficult and that NRIS might develop a new management policy for overhead management. The new contract format would similar to DEQ's policy in that all contracts would charge 40% overhead, which ends up being less than what is currently charged. This will make management of contracts and personal services easier.

Natural Heritage Program:

Crispin gave an update of NHP.

Staffing:

1) Web developer-Chuck Tilly was hired for this position, which is shared 60/40 with FWP. This will help limit other staff time on web issues. Chuck has good experience with database programming. The Forest Service supports the funding for this position on the Heritage side.

2) Heritage is currently recruiting for a lead Zoologist. This has been difficult; they are on the 2nd round of recruiting for this position. It does look good now and they may have 3 very qualified applicants. This position would also partner up with FWP, which will be funding 25% of the position for at least the 1st year. There is also some funding from the Forest Service and BLM.

3) NHP just posted a job for a GIS and Biological data coordinator. Cedron Jones has been the GIS person on ½ time. NHP needs are growing and they need someone in the position full time. Cedron will be concentrating solely on the Stewardship Mapping, information for conservation planning (ownership, mgmt info, conserv. easements...). NHP has 2-year commitments for funding the full time GIS position from private organizations.

NHP Budget:

Crispin told the group that the core budget was looking good. This is due to efficiency and expense consciousness, as well as having a couple of vacancies. Heritage has about 30 different projects going on including work with: NPS, EPA, BLM, FWS, NRCS, DEQ, TNC, and PPL. Work includes inventory, biological survey, easement mapping, web development, conservation management for species of special concern, and wetland work.

Crispin also mentioned that the international network, the “conservation data network” is due for a technology update. Heritage is beginning to develop prototype for this project.

Crispin told the group about a new book that has been published based on a compilation of nation wide Heritage data. This book, “Precious Heritage,” is the first ever put together by the Science Dept. of TNC. Crispin mentioned that the book was on sale and passed around the information for ordering. (Call Oxford Univ. Press at 1-800-230-3242 and refer to promo code K265, credit card only).

Wetzel asked Crispin to have Cedron contact him regarding some land ownership changes.

Legislative Issues:

Hill walked the group through the “NRIS Funding Comparison” handout and mentioned the money is a little on the low side. NRIS is now at 5.4 FTE and has asked to increase that to 6 FTE in the Governor’s proposal. NRIS has also asked for a \$180,844 total increase and would like to reorganize the funding from agencies. Funding from the DNRC and University would be new. The budget is approved as of now by Governor Racicot, but one never knows what governor elect Martz or the Legislature might do, so essentially, the funding is still “up in the air.”

Hess-Herbert asked why there was such an increase of funding for only and increase of .6 FTE.

Hill responded saying that it will be a gain for operations. Heritage will gain \$75,000, but is not a FTE in legislative sense. Hill also mentioned that there could be problems getting the funding asked for because additional funding from DEQ and DNRC would also come out of the General Fund. This may not go over well with legislators.

Hill told the group that NRIS Funding would be discussed in three different committees during the legislature. Funding from DOT will be in the transportation committee, NRIS will go to the education committee, and DNRC and DEQ funding will be discussed in the natural resource committee. Coordination of the 3 committees will be difficult.

Lovelace added that DEQ does want to do this and the budget office is behind it at this point in time. She has not heard any news of “not supporting” as of yet.

Hess-Herbert asked if funding from DEQ needed to come from the general fund, and if it was an increase or redirection of money in the general fund.

Lovelace answered that it had been written that it would come from the general fund so that’s where it has to come from. Also, it would be an increase not a redirection in the general fund. It will not look good.

Crispin mentioned that a good thing that could come out of some of the funding changes is that they will be line-itemed commitments, which is a big improvement. She also asked that NRIS advisory committee members attend “Library Day.” They will have the ability to talk about NRIS users from outside perspectives. It would be very valuable.

Hill added that “Library Day” is a chance for legislators to learn about the library and it’s programs. It will be Jan. 11, 2001.

Lovelace mentioned that there is another coordination meeting scheduled for the same evening at DEQ, which is intended for legislators to come.

Anderson said NRIS should get some maps over there too.

Hess-Herbert asked what level at the agencies would NRIS like to have attend Library Day.

Hill answered that those who could communicate best with legislators on the importance of NRIS; individuals who would be listened to would be great.

Hill went over some of the proposed legislation that might affect NRIS. One was to revise IT laws and create a Dept. of Technology. Included in this was that one member of that Dept. would be on the NRIS advisory board. Other titles were mentioned but details are unknown at this time.

Strategic Plan:

Hill thanked those who helped with the strategic plan. It is now in the process of being implemented. After several reads through it, Hill was able to form a structural hierarchy. It is divided into 2 groups: "User Services and Support," involving planning and outreach, and "GIS and Information Systems Development," involving programming, database management, and Internet work. Hill went over the NRIS organizational chart and sections functions handouts.

Sternberg asked about the feedback from the staff. Hill responded that he has generally been hearing nothing but good comments. It was suggested to watch out for top heavy management. Hill feels good about the plan, and thinks to expect one manager would be too much.

Hill also told the group that NRIS plans to wait out the Legislature before filling the vacant position. They need to see if they can really hire that position. Also, the job description will be rewritten to include management responsibilities. There may be an acting manager until this position is filled.

Crispin added that Heritage has 10.5 FTE's and 1.5 vacancies. (These are not State FTE's).

Anderson mentioned that the original org. chart in the strategic plan had different titles. They had been struggling with a mixture of functions. He feels that Hill came in with a fresh look and came up with a more logical break up of duties.

Lovelace would like to read the new job description for the vacant position when it has been written. She feels that team management can work. It is necessary to have good communication. She asked if only the "user services and support" section would go out and seek work. Hill answered that both sections will. There are people very successful at it in both sections.

Crispin added that Heritage and NRIS need to work on improving their outreach skills. She felt that the thinking behind the sections was to give appropriate attention to outreach, but not limit it to one group.

Hill mentioned that there would be teams formed to cross all 3 lines. Members from the State Library, NRIS and Heritage will be on teams. The teams consist of NRIS management, System Administration, Web, GIS, and Database. He feels that there is a big need to coordinate with each other and erase the boundaries between the programs.

Hill told the group about the idea of a request center. One person would run this and pass on the request to the best-suited person. Implementation will take place around the 1st of the year if NRIS gets the okay from the library commission.

Crispin described the Heritage organizational chart. Baumler asked if there will be redundancy, too many people doing the same job? Anderson replied that this will help guide developers in a common strategy. In terms of overlap, there is plenty of work to be done to avoid redundancy. Baumler wondered if NRIS would end up absorbing Heritage like it did with water resources. Crispin stated that just wasn't possible. There would not be a way to charge the time and get paid. It's just a reality because Heritage is not a state agency. "We have to work with what we have." Hill added that barriers exist but NRIS won't let that get in the way, would "kind of erase the barriers." NRIS will give a little and Heritage will give a little and both would not worry about billing.

Lovelace said that there is more integration now than there ever has been. Heritage gathers information and NRIS is not charged with that responsibility. There are ways to work together and share. There has been a big improvement.

Wetzel added that to affiliate Heritage with the state would not be a viable political strategy anyhow. NRIS would need to go in and ask for additional 12 FTE rather than the .6. This would not go over well with the legislature.

Crispin feels that the integration will go well. Hill added that he would present this to the library commission for approval.

Lovelace brought up a question on the names of the sections. She wondered if the title "GIS and Information Systems Development" was redundant. GIS is Geographical Information Systems and then Information Systems is repeated. Hill said that the terminology may be redundant but the meaning is not. People connect NRIS with GIS and it is necessary to keep that in the title.

Issues of Concern:

Hess-Herbert brought up the issue of the role of the advisory committee. The initial use was to help build the program. Now the committee just gets together to tell everyone what is going on with NRIS and then the members go back to work. Hess-Herbert asked if the committee is functioning and does it have other roles to play. If not, is the committee needed anymore? Should it be redefined?

Wetzel commented that there are two functions that the committee serves; development and provide input in terms of agency support and budget. He feels that the committee does not do much development anymore. Wetzel doesn't look at the details of how to run NRIS; that is NRIS' decision.

Anderson feels that the committee could be a conduit for agency needs and ideas. Wetzel said if the committee goes in that direction, other people may be better suited from his agency. If it's budget issues, he's probably the one. He added that the roles are splitting.

Lovelace stated that the committee has been everywhere, all over the board, in terms of what it has done for NRIS. She feels that the role of the committee should remain flexible. There are still issues out there that the group hasn't resolved, things that are still on the table. Does the committee want to explore that? Lovelace feels that those things need to stay on the table. A role does exist to address change, future activities. The committee should be prepared for that. Lovelace wants to meet during or just after the Legislature and then decide what to do.

Hill also said there is a role to be played by the committee. This group is more involved with NRIS than others. It carries more weight having a committee than just NRIS staff. It provides legitimacy.

Hill and Lovelace agree to wait until after the legislative session before addressing this issue.

Hess-Herbert asked Hill to think about the position of the committee during the session and the role the members could play. If NRIS needs support let the committee members know so they can help. Hill replied that he would keep the members informed on the issues and ask for help when it is needed. Hess-Herbert also asked for updates. Lovelace also offered her help during the session, and added that the entire committee should.

Crispin mentioned Library Day. It would be good for committee members to attend to give examples of information that is used and needed by other agencies. Uses that NRIS and Heritage may not be aware of. Uses that impact the economy. Hill agreed with Crispin.

Hess-Herbert mentioned that they could potentially do more harm than good, you never know what the legislature is thinking. Crispin added that it might be a good idea to have someone from the user group, that NRIS and Heritage may not know, to explain it's worth. Lovelace stated that an example of something that helped in a key decision would be good. Hess-Herbert added that it's hard to know what to present to hit the right chord.

Coldwell commented that the role of NRIS is totally objective. They are not the decision making body, and don't lean one way or the other. This is important to let legislators know. NRIS gives the information and others make the decisions. Lovelace added that examples sell the program.

The group decided that the next meeting should be after the legislature.

The meeting was adjourned and Anderson showed some examples of new and upcoming applications on the Internet, such as the interactive mapping and the 404 permit finder.

