

SUMMARY OF GATEWAYS NETWORK WORKSHOP DISCUSSIONS FEEDBACK TO GATEWAYS NETWORK MEMBERS¹

“Assessing the Needs and Options for Development of a Support Organization for the Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network“

Background

The Chesapeake Bay Gateways Network (CBGN) Working Group and the National Park Service are exploring the potential for a support organization for the Gateways Network. Such an organization might be developed to further enhance the Network’s abilities in a variety of ways, however, such organizations generally assist with developing additional funding sources, marketing, and carrying out certain projects.

The Working Group asked that the following steps be taken as part of this exploration:

1. Conduct a needs assessment of the Gateway network’s member sites;²
2. Present the support organization idea to member sites and solicit input through workshops, focus groups, or other means;
3. Using the needs assessment and the feedback, assess the potential for a support organization and outline potential business elements;
4. Validate the organization concept and elements with the member sites; and
5. Present the information to the Working Group for deliberation.

Discussions about the support organization idea (step 2 above) were held with Gateways Network Member sites during a series of Gateways Network workshops³. Participants heard a presentation on the concept of a support group for the Network as a whole. Following the presentation, each workshop discussed that idea, as well as ways that Member sites might want to participate in decisions about the growth and future of the Network. Three questions kicked off the dialogue:

- What might a support organization working with the NPS and the Network bring in added value?
- What would your member site want to see in added resources from such an organization?
- And finally, but separately, how would your member site like to participate in making decisions about the growth and management of the Network?

This document summarizes those discussions, based upon the comments captured on flipcharts during the discussion.

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² This needs assessment is presented in a separate document.

³ Workshops were held in November/December 2001 in Annapolis, Salisbury, Cecil County, Maryland and Yorktown and the Northern Neck (George Washington’s Birthplace NM), Virginia. Attendees included Gateways Network member site representatives, members of the CBGN Working Group and representatives of potential member sites.

Short Summary

Workshop participants strongly reaffirmed their belief that the relationships with the National Park Service and the Chesapeake Bay Program provide significant value to the Network *and* to its members. They want these relationships and the leadership of the Working Group to remain in place. Participants also identified several efforts that would improve the Network as a whole and that could be undertaken immediately, including enhanced interpretive assistance and promotional efforts. Finally, participants believe that a Network-wide support group could add value to the Network and to the NPS, but feel at this point that the discussion is very preliminary. Network members expect the discussion to continue until details are sufficiently clear that consensus can be reached.

Building on a Firm Foundation

Certain themes garnered consistent agreement across all five workshops. Although brought out by the support organization topic, many of these themes/needs could be met within the current Network structure.

Maintain NPS and Bay Program Connection:

Participants in all five workshops agreed that leadership of the National Park Service is integral to the success of the Network, both in terms of expertise and in terms of stature. Further, there was general consensus that the Working Group, and its ties to the Chesapeake Bay Program, are fundamental strengths of the Network. Participants want these structural elements of the Network to remain predominant.

Maintain Working Group Management Structure:

Across all five workshops participants generally agreed that Gateway Members should not participate in decisions selecting member sites or awarding grants. Some saw those decisions as too political, others as requiring a broader knowledge of the Network than currently available to members, and others saw the decisions as a conflict of interest.

Most participants also agreed with members who voiced a caution regarding the time and effort required in managing the Network, given that most member sites need every staff hour and dollar invested in their own sites. For example, in discussions about the potential for a Network support organization, several comments warned against requiring membership by Gateways Sites or financial support from sites.

Share Network Information:

However, there was general agreement that a number of actions could bring a better understanding of the issues before the Network and a better opportunity for working together to the Network sites. These are listed below in the order of time required of Member sites.

1. Notify sites of Working Group meetings and agendas before hand
2. Create web-based feedback and dialogue opportunities to respond to the agendas.

3. Survey sites on key issues and topics discussed at Working Group, using on-line listserv and surveys and email notice to alert Members, and then those interested may use the member-only discussion forums.
4. Conduct periodic focus groups on plans, issues, decisions.
5. Hold an annual Bay-wide conference/workshop.
6. Hold Working Group meetings at Member sites.
7. Have Member site representatives on the Working Group.
8. Have the Working Group sponsor visits such as group paddles, tours, etc. in conjunction with informal roundtable of members and Working Group, perhaps rotating quarterly meetings to water trail/site/hubs.

Throughout these conversations there was a concern that small communities and the smaller sites receive a share of attention. For example, a participant asked for “some kind of on-going mechanism so the voices of small communities are represented.”

Keep Bay at Core of Network:

A second consistent theme in the comments is the advice to keep the program focused on its core mission: the betterment of the Bay. Some tension is felt by Members between the visitation/experience-the-Bay goals and the conservation/restoration goals. However, in the project designs and in the comments, a balance seemed to be achieved and expected. Again, keeping the relationship with the Chesapeake Bay Program strong relates to this theme.

Build High-Quality Visitor Experiences:

Providing a consistently high-quality experience for visitors also came up in most workshops. As one participant said, “With NPS assistance feel like we all (Gateways Members) can come up to a level of quality that visitors can go to a site in Virginia and then expect to have an equally positive experience at our museum. We need a dialogue or consultation similar to this to facilitate such quality standards across the network. Some level of organization is crucial to achieving this, but first we need a real hands on dialogue.”

This view was echoed in comments that the Gateway designation from the NPS is a ‘seal of approval’, particularly for tourists. A post-it note said: “What has started as a source of funding (a grant source) is evolving into a ‘club’ whose members have received a stamp of approval. This is a positive comment.”

Begin Immediately to Enhance Intra-Network Efforts:

Development of Network-wide resources may be furthered by a Network support organization, but Network-wide efforts focused on interpretive assistance and promotional activities could also be enhanced by decisions of the NPS and Working Group. Similarly, building geographic and thematic links among Gateway sites could occur as the Network continues to grow through member actions and Network workshops.

Among the ideas for efforts that a Network support organization might undertake were several that could be initiated or performed within the current structure, although perhaps requiring some additional staff or volunteer time. These included:

1. A program of recognition and awards for excellent projects, volunteers and staff, and other Gateway successes.
2. A newsletter, or self-supplied web news area about Gateway sites and their successes.
3. Annual workshop/training meetings for Member sites.
4. A process for small communities to meet the NPS and/or Working Group on the community's terms and determine whether or not the Gateway Network can enhance the community.
5. Venues for enhanced communication among sites, particularly through the internet and workshops.

Thoughts on the Role of a Support Organization

Participants listed many value-added efforts for a support organization, but generally were cautious about any decision until a much more specific definition of needs, roles, timing and a business plan could be discussed.

On Organizational Form and Function:

Workshop participants agreed with Working Group members that – while the discussion could be valuable in concept – any decision about a Network support organization has to be based upon the specifics. How do the roles of the NPS, the Working Group and this potential organization relate? Is there an organizational chart? Is this a centrally governed organization or a linking of concentric rings of effort within the existing Network? As a participant said, the organization “needs to deliver and thus needs a sound business plan.”

Participants also restated the importance of the Gateways Network/Chesapeake Bay Program connection. The relationship as part of the Chesapeake Bay Program is important and the Gateways Network Members bring weight to the Chesapeake Bay Program's presence before state and federal governments. There is consensus among the workshops that, in one participant's words, “We don't want a substitute for the NPS and Chesapeake Bay Program/Working Group.” As another said, “Support organization is the operative term – we don't want to lose the NPS in any way, we just want to add additional capabilities.”

Two workshops noted that it's very hard to make the Chesapeake Bay Program connection in the marketplace. One asked, “Could this distance the NPS/Gateways Network from the Chesapeake Bay Program?” Perhaps the approach in general is best summed by the participant who said: “Value-added is different. If we could have the spirit of the current CBP Working Group plus an arm that could raise funds and add services, that could be best of both worlds.”

In addition to wanting more specifics about the role and form, three workshops raised and discussed whether development of a support group is premature at this point in the Network's growth. No consensus exists on this point, but it is an important one to debate further. Would it be better for the initiative to create a friends group to come from the bottom up? Wait a bit and let the Gateways Network develop and see what happens? One participant said in reaction to the presentation, “Friends group envy shouldn't be a reason for starting a Gateways Network friends group.”

Thus there exists general agreement that both the Working Group and the Members would need to have a very clear understanding about how the roles would be defined and how the dollars would be managed through agreements among the NPS, the Working Group, Members and the potential organization. Generally people recognized that to be effective the organization would be staffed “to work at this level” and would possibly take on some projects directly. That raised the need for detail about how the organization would work with NPS staff.

As these issues were discussed, consensus emerged on several cautions about the role and demeanor of a potential support organization. The following comments best capture these thoughts:

“Would this be another layer of bureaucracy that would be harder to deal with?”
“Need to avoid creating a bureaucracy that makes it harder to do things. Stay entrepreneurial and flexible.”

“Over time would the organization focus primarily on fund-raising and lobbying and thus supplant other objectives?”

“Good idea, but depends on whether becomes active or passive. Some friends groups are there in name only.”

Several workshops also asked, “Are there organizations who may be willing to restructure to address Gateways Network needs?” “May already have the contacts needed?” “What is cost for running a new organization vs. working with an existing organization? Might this kind of evaluation occur?” While several participants noted that a focused mission of such an organization could be more effective than an agency with multiple agendas, others asked that the Working Group explore using existing 501(c)(3)s to address Gateways Network needs.

Finally, some individuals asked very practical questions about organizational issues, including:
Might the organization need a long-term federal grant to assist start-up?
Would NPS Director’s Orders 32 and 21 restrict the flexibility of this non-profit? Would this non-profit need to be under NPS Director’s Orders?⁴
Might it be hard to get individuals skilled at working across four states or to get donors to be interested in regional group?

Advice Regarding Network Member Roles:

Workshops agreed on the value to preserve the strength and independence of the local non-profit Members and those affiliated with sites. At the same time, a number of participants said that members have willingly given up a certain degree of independence because the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and welcomed ways to leverage the Network “that add to each of us.”

The discussion over homogenization and independence is a critical one to this endeavor. While one participant noted that Member sites can always choose to opt out, the general agreement was that Member sites should not have to use a Network support organization, but rather have the opportunity for receiving assistance from it.

⁴ The mentioned Director’s Orders set policy for NPS relationships with support organizations.

Several asked “Should the organization have the Gateway Member sites as members?” A different way of looking at the question was “Would this organization have to be supported by Gateways Network member sites?” At several points in the discussions participants said that Member sites don’t have the revenues/resources/time to invest heavily in starting or running a Member organization. Thus we would expect general agreement that any Network support group has to stand on its own in terms of revenues. It can’t be a burden to sites.

Use for Network-wide Marketing:

Participants discussed marketing and identity for the Gateways Network as a whole. This potential use of a Network support organization to foster Network visibility and marketing got generally high marks, but with some questions. What competition and what branding currently exist? Are the Network’s current identity and the identity of the NPS sufficient? And several participants reminded the group that the identity of the support organization itself should not be the issue, but rather that the identity sought is that for the Network. As one person said, “This is a Friends of the Network and should focus on the Network.”

There was some discussion also of the breadth of the visibility and marketing: “Initially probably it’s most important to have the focus be bay-wide to help build identity.” “Expanding the identity of the Network is a positive for its Members and for the Bay – but needs to support the Chesapeake Bay Program as it does so.”

Others said that visibility of the individual Gateways needs to be raised and translated into simple terms for visitors. “Increase exposure of the Gateways.” Participants also said that the fundamentals of communication require identification of audiences, information, and marketing needs. Practical examples of actions that could be taken now included templates for grant press releases developed for all grant winners; media exposure from working with some existing groups such as the boy scouts; and getting the word out through listservs and other web tools.

Comments also focused on linking visitation and marketing with resources and services: “Help attract visitors and provide sites with improvements in services/resources.” “Link resources to needs at sites.” “Marketing, promotion and products that go with them.”

Use as the Gateway Network’s Advocate:

All the workshops agreed that a support organization could “act as an advocate for additional funds and resources – NPS can’t do that.” Participants agreed it could create a powerful advocacy group to talk with Congressional members. “We also need it to be an advocate for the public funding, before Congress, for both.” “Take the ‘look what we’ve done’ message to Congress.” Individuals extended this view to the possibility of regional affiliations to help insure the Gateways Network is considered in state and regional efforts.

Some Concerns and Advice Regarding Fund-raising:

“How does the fund raising work?” came up at each workshop. Creation of any new organization raises concern over competing with organizations for members and for funds. People addressed this very differently – some sites said they had a general concern and others only if the organization solicited individuals/local donors already giving to individual Gateways. There was

general agreement that a Network support organization needs to be value -added, with no compulsion. But there is probably general agreement that the organization would need a business plan that demonstrated generally non-competitive sources for funding, without competing with local existing groups. Only one participant noted that they are part of larger institution raising national corporate and foundation gifts.

The flexibility that a support organization can offer to the NPS in fundraising was widely recognized. At each workshop at least several participants work with a Friends Group for their own state or local site, and two had Friends representing their sites. For example, one state park member noted that the experience in Virginia is that there has been value in a Friends non-profit to accept/solicit donations.

Several people mentioned that long term funding sources are key to success. Also, several felt that a Bay-wide Network support group could bring corporate CEO's to the table effectively. Another said, "This really could bring resources to add capacity to the NPS/Working Group to benefit both the Network and sites."

One workshop raised the issue regarding the displacement of funds – specifically displacement of federal funds by increasing other sources. This is a general concern among all Friends-governmental relationships and would need attention. Another asked the question, "Would this be threatening to existing friends groups, e.g. state park groups?" with an answer at least in that workshop that the same attention given to competition with Members should be extended to Friends.

Use as a Buying Cooperative:

Two workshops spent some time visualizing the support organization as a "cooperative organization for purchasing materials and technical assistance to maximize efficiency" and said such a role could be a benefit to prevent each small site from reinventing certain wheels. Specifics included indefinite quantity contracting, especially around common needs like Gateways Network signage and dealing with bulk orders for specific services. But some voiced concern regarding the importance of continuing their support for local businesses.

Providing Services for Members and Network-wide:

Many specific comments addressed ways in which a Network support organization could help Member sites and the Network. General comments included:

1. Could be a clearing-house for problem-solving. Need one-on-one consultations as well.
2. The key is to make sure that all sites receive the same degree of attention/service/.
3. Also requires knowledge and expertise base relevant to whole region.
4. Possible regionalization of Gateways Network – linkages one key to any network. Need to build geographic and thematic links.

Specific ideas included the following [in captured or post-it form]:

1. [The] Support organization could go to Gateways and provide assistance to get to [higher] level of quality.
2. Friends group could sponsor education packet to schools to promote al the sites.

3. Coordinated, user-friendly Gateways Network signage – give us the expertise to conform to some kind of standard. Help us avoid reinventing the wheel with info on where, how to get things and buying cooperatively.
4. Contract with the ‘park net’ guide – an example of use of corporate, business products that can ‘come to us’.
5. Seek grants on behalf of Gateways.
6. Advocate for Gateways Network budget.
7. Sharing resources across state lines.
8. Provide additional funding sources beyond the local and regional sources reached by members.
9. Take project ideas to gateway sites.
10. Help with networking among member sites.
11. Opportunities to leverage funds for multiple sites.

The discussions were generally lively and open, but with complete agreement that they were very preliminary. Members expect additional information and consultation before any decision is made.