Stewardship Strategic Planning Meeting Report

VDOF Board Room, Charlottesville, VA

Meeting Date: October 25, 2016
Report Date: March 20, 2017
Report Prepared by: Brian Fuller

SUMMARY

On Tuesday, October 25, 2016, members of the Stewardship Division staff gathered in Charlottesville for a day-long strategic planning meeting regarding the future of the VOF Stewardship Program. Staff discussed how much the workload burden has increased and how the program focus has changed over the last 10 years. Martha Little, Stewardship Director, and Brett Glymph, Executive Director, were also active participants throughout the day.

In the morning, Erika Richardson, Harry Hibbitts, and Brian Fuller led break-out group discussions regarding the current status of property monitoring and landowner relationships, the increased demand for the review and interpretation of easement deeds and issues, and the increased difficulty in documenting, tracking and reporting our work. After lunch, Brian facilitated a “SWOT” Analysis discussion of Stewardship, and we debated the Strengths and Weaknesses (internal) and the Opportunities and Threats (external) facing Stewardship staff. As a part of that exercise, staff attempted to developed a mission statement for the division. Later in the day, Harry facilitated a visionary discussion about the future ideas and goals of the division and the potential tools needed to achieve them.

Stewardship management staff synthesized the data and ideas collected throughout the experience, and produced this summary of our findings. This report will be provided to the Senior Management Team (SMT) and to the Board of Trustees (BOT) this spring, and it will serve as a model for agency-wide strategic planning later in 2017.

ATTENDEES

Brett Glymph, Executive Director
Martha Little, Deputy Director
Bill Wasserman, Abingdon
Tommy Oravetz, Blacksburg
Brian Fuller, Charlottesville
Joseph Kuhn, Charlottesville
Tracy Hibbitts, Charlottesville
Brad Baskette, Richmond
Abbe Kennedy, Staunton
Harry Hibbitts, Staunton
Krista Hozyash, Staunton
Erika Richardson, Warrenton
George Sutton, Warrenton
Justin Altice, Warrenton

GROUND RULES

Successful planning meetings are rooted within established boundaries for productive dialog to occur. Therefore, the group was tasked with setting some ground rules for the participation. Everyone agreed on the following:

1. Suspend judgement
2. Be open-minded
3. Be polite
4. Participate
5. Limit electronics

SMALL GROUP BRAINSTORMING AND DISCUSSIONS

Prior to the meeting, Stewardship management solicited staff members for topics of concern to discuss during the meeting. The topics fell into 3 broad categories. At the beginning of the meeting, we divided the room into small group areas to debate the most pertinent topics, led by the following staff:

- Monitoring and Landowner Relations (Erika)
  - Jurisdictional agreements, monitoring types and frequency, etc.
- Review and Interpretation (Brian)
  - Landowner/buyer requests, violation response, complex issues, etc.
- Documenting, Tracking, and Reporting (Harry)
  - EMA, Box, SMARTS, spreadsheets, etc.

The groups were given approximately 30 minutes to openly brainstorm and discuss ideas and issues about each topic. Then each group was given 10 minutes to report. The following is a summary of each small group report:

Monitoring and Landowner Relations

The purpose of this brainstorming goal was to come up with ideas to help create a better monitoring program that is efficient and reflective of the capabilities of the existing stewardship staff and available technology.

Currently, most yearly plans are created by each staff member for their assigned region, but some are developed by the supervisor in the office and then distributed to staff. Most plans are determined by using EMA, SMARTs, and the staff's previous year plan including the "last SFR date." Most staff then use GIS to help organize site visits by location. Generally, most plans are not completed by year end, with many staff having other duties, assignments, and issues that take priority over monitoring.

For the last 5-6 years, monitoring has been completed through the following methods:

- Stewardship Field Report (SFR)
- Geographic Imagery (GI)
- Landowner Survey (LS)
- Visual Assessment (VA)
- Courthouse Research (typically used as a supplement to all other types of monitoring)

The following chart shows the Strengths and Weaknesses of each method:

Type	Strengths	Weaknesses
SFR	• most reliable • maintains landowner relations	• weather dependent • time consuming • can require extensive documentation • difficulty in communicating with landowner • technology issues
LS	• contact info updated • centralized • increases monitoring #s • may alert staff to potential issues	• requires regional staff time to complete • no personal landowner interaction • may duplicate work if SFR also planned
GI	• centralized • increases monitoring #s • may alert staff to potential issues	• requires regional staff time to complete • no personal landowner interaction • may duplicate work if SFR also planned • only works when have new aerials
VA	• increases monitoring #'s • may alert staff to potential issues	• dangerous • usually only portion of property visible
Courthouse Research	• may alert staff to potential issues	• time consuming • no personal landowner interaction

Currently, most monitoring is done by the staff assigned to a particular region. Only one office has a dedicated monitor while most offices have staff that monitor and handle issues. A couple offices have volunteers that help with GIs, LSs and SFRs but most offices only have staff/intern monitoring only. The latest round of GIs was completed by Blacksburg office interns. The latest round of LSs was managed by the office assistant in Warrenton.

Each monitoring type requires a form to be filled out. GIs also require mapping work. For SFRs, photos and maps may need to be created and organized. It is a very laborious process for Stewardship staff. Even with the attempts at centralized monitoring, it still requires each staff member to complete the monitoring form and photo album (if necessary), shuffle the paperwork into the green file, post everything electronically on BOX, update the property status in EMA, then update their individual SMART system.

From the group discussion during the meeting, the following ideas were mentioned:

- Restructure stewardship staff duties into “field” and “office” staff, where field staff handle monitoring and office staff handle larger issues, requests, violations, etc. (could help insurance or worker’s compensation rates?)
- LSs are sent with map and landowners are asked to identify changes and send photos of those changes
- Add Stewardship Assistants in each office to do monitoring
- Create online database so landowners can update their contact information
- Recruit more interns (who will manage more interns?)
- Monitoring staff handle larger territories than traditional regional approach
- SFR triggered by RFR or other issue
- SFRs occur every 5-7-10 years (up from 1-2-3 years)
- Drones (mixed feelings on the suggestion)
- Collective SMART file for monitoring
- Eliminate all other methods except SFRs
- Centralize some RFRs like underground utility review, VDOT requests, etc.
- Centralize GIM, LS and courthouse research
- GIM and LS only sent to landowners who aren’t due for SFR (who will set up list, how often will then be sent out?)
- Use courthouse research at years end to prioritize visits to new owners and those with deeds that need follow-up the following year (logistics?)
- Reduce volunteer monitoring since so time consuming for staff (overhead for staff time, iPhone info helpful?)
- Reduce tracking same info in multiple places
- Base planning on geography

- Prioritize monitoring based on "violation" threat
- Train volunteers to handle courthouse research, GIMs and LSs
- Reduction in required documentation, forms, etc.
- Use technology to update forms, photos, maps, etc. in field
- Add "last SFR date" column to GIS attribute data
- Develop tiered monitoring approach
- Documentation (forms, maps, etc.) should only be required when changes have been identified; EMA will be used to track monitoring when no changes have occurred

Review and Interpretation

Requests for review (RFRs) and deed interpretations have increased over the last several years and now constitute the majority of staff time. As easements continue to subdivide and/or transfer ownership, recent agricultural trends such as wine-making and cider-brewing improves, the desire for renewable and sustainable resources such as timber continues, and the need for utility and infrastructure development/improvement increases, staff will continue to be inundated with requests to confirm the compatibility of these activities with the specific conservation values of each easement property.

So, what are the bottlenecks and road blocks to providing customer service? What does it mean to be thorough vs. effective? How does staff know that it is doing a "good job?" Currently, a lot of staff time is dedicated to certain issues that might not be potential enforcement problems:

- Potential and contract property buyers
- Forestry plan reviews
- Routine responses (number of houses, hunting, agricultural uses, fencing, etc.)

This group also discussed how the current policies can be burdensome to staff efficiency and effectiveness. There seems to be a difference among the staff between how a policy is written and how it is individually implemented. This can lead to inconsistency and frustration. In addition, there seems to be multiple versions of policies, and many staff members don't always know which version is current or even where to find it.

In order to mitigate the impacts of the increasing burden of reviews and interpretations, staff in this group suggested the following options, methods, and questions to consider:

- Create multiple RFR forms for different types/levels of review (hierarchy system)
- Provide more autonomy to staff by updating policies and procedures for consistency
- Implement a "peer review" system among specialist staff to reduce the need for management review of every request

- Provide a "live chat" discussion session on a weekly/monthly basis to discuss issues
- Divide staff into their areas of "expertise" (create committees) and create a calendar for issue response on a rotational basis (on-call)
- Consider how to best avoid and/or handle violations – fees vs. fines; negotiation vs. litigation vs. legislation
- Streamline the review process:
    - Can certain responses be automated or list of FAQs provided on the Website/newsletter?
    - Can submissions be made online and "on-call" staff provide a response?
    - Do traditional stewardship regions matter?
    - Can requests be reassigned to other staff across the state as needed?

It was determined that to truly enforce certain easement terms and discourage violations, the BOT will need to consider fines. However, VOF will need enabling legislation from the General Assembly to levy and collect fines. Currently, VOF can only charge fees that are advertised for certain applications. We need to be able to fine for violations after they occur.

Documenting, Tracking, and Reporting

This group analyzed the difficult topics of how the Stewardship Division proves its "worth." How should we document our work? What type of products should we produce? Do our current tracking methods take too much time? Do we have too many redundant reporting systems? Why do we have to document, track, and report at all?

There was consensus on the following issues regarding this topic:

1. Our current tracking and reporting systems (multiple Excel spreadsheets) are too redundant and take too much time to complete an "entry."
2. We must document and report to inform the SMT, the BOT, and the public (through the Website and/or newsletter) of current issues and trends, big projects (infrastructure, violations, etc.), "feel good" stories, and monitoring stories.
3. We must document and report to maintain accurate public records for FOIA, etc.
4. We need a new database to handle these types of tasks and requests.

A new database has been an identified need within VOF for several years now, and it is currently awaiting funding for creation and implementation. A couple of years ago, our IT and SMT staff worked with a consultant to develop a "roadmap" for the creation of a new database.

Stewardship staff would like to review those findings again to compare them with some of the current needs and desires, including:

- "Dashboard" portal page for each staff member to track:
    - Assigned tasks and projects and time spent on them
    - Visualize workload so that managers can evenly distribute assignments
    - Ability to run quarterly reports
- Stewardship needs to track tasks and projects in these categories:
    - Requests for Review
    - Potential and Real Violations
    - Utility/Infrastructure Projects
    - Easement Monitoring
- Need to increase electronic efficiency for staff:
    - Track communication in one place or system to reduce or remove redundancies
    - Ability to create reports "on the fly" (in the field) to reduce post-processing
    - Reduce or remove paper files, forms, etc. – migrate from green files to Box

SWOT ANALYSIS
SWOT is a strategic planning tool used to evaluate the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats where an organization is requiring a decision in pursuit of an objective, or desired end state. It involves monitoring the forces and environment internal and external to the organization. The method is credited to Albert Humphrey of Stanford University, circa 1960.

SWOT consists of:

- Strengths: Attributes of the organization which are helpful to achieving the objective.
- Weaknesses: Attributes of the organization which are harmful to achieving the objective.
- Opportunities: External conditions which are helpful to achieving the objective.
- Threats: External conditions which are harmful to achieving the objective.

The SWOT analysis must start with defining a desired end state or objective. If a clear objective has been identified, SWOT analysis can be used to help in the pursuit of that objective. Correct identification of SWOTs is essential because subsequent steps in the process of planning for achievement of the selected objective are to be derived from the SWOTs.

First, the decision makers must determine whether the objective is attainable, given the SWOTs. If the objective is not attainable, then a different objective must be selected and the process repeated. If the objective seems attainable, the SWOTs are used as inputs by the decision makers to the creative generation of possible strategies, by asking and answering each of the following four questions as many times as necessary:

- How can we use each Strength?
- How can we stop each Weakness?
- How can we exploit each Opportunity?
- How can we defend against each Threat?

The purpose of any SWOT analysis is to identify and group key pieces of information into two main categories:

- Internal factors: The strengths and weaknesses internal to the organization.
- External factors: The opportunities and threats presented by the external environment.

In general, the internal factors may be viewed as strengths or weaknesses depending upon their impact on the organization's objectives. What may represent strengths with respect to one objective, may be weaknesses for another objective. The results are often presented in the form of a matrix, like the one shown at the bottom of Page 9.

Brian kick-started this session by providing some ideas about what Stewardship may be:

- Monitoring/Documentation
- Landowner Relationships
- Customer Service
- VOF Representative
- Negotiation
- Flexible/Adaptable

In order to complete the Stewardship SWOT Analysis, the entire group spent some time trying to develop an Objective (i.e., Mission Statement) for the division. Several ideas were given:

- Protect public interest
- Protect conservation values
- Document changes
- Ensure consistency
- Represent!
- Answer questions
- Partner in protection
- In perpetuity!
- Land conservation
- Maintain spirit
- Public values on private lands
- Outcome, not tool…

Then we narrowed those ideas down to several key words (emphasis given in italics):

- *Investment*
- Caretaker
- Protect
- *Conservation*
- *Public*
- Maintenance
- Management
- Assistance
- Perpetuity
- Vibrant
- Sustainability
- Natural Environment

These keys words were then combined to develop several potential mission statements, with inspiration included from the 1966 legislation that created VOF:

- Protecting the public investment in land conservation for now and future generations.
- Protecting the public investment in the preservation of natural, scenic, historic, scientific, open-space and recreational resources.
- Ensuring natural resource conservation for public enjoyment.

In the end, it was decided that an official division mission statement would need some further consideration, but that the idea of "conserving the public investment in open space" would drive the following SWOT analysis:

STEWARDSHIP SWOT

	Helpful to achieving the objective	Harmful to achieving the objective
Internal (attributes of the organization)	**Strengths** • Professional/technical staff • Flexible/adaptable • Policies/procedures • Dedication!	**Weaknesses** • Lack of enforcement tools • Lack of communication • Distance/fragmentation • Lack of staff • Easement drafting (deed template) • Current technology
External (attributes of the organization)	**Opportunities** • Technology • Marketing/public relations • Responsiveness • Public agency • Future partnerships • Recognition as national leader	**Threats** • Budget • Public perception/misconception • Current partnerships • "NIMBY-ism" • The "unknown" – what's next?

In summary, SWOT analysis is one tool that can be helpful in stating an objective or mission of an organization, and then evaluating the factors that influence that group. Stewardship management staff will need to further evaluate these results and determine ways to take advantage of the strengths and opportunities, while mitigating the weaknesses and threats.

THE NEXT TEN YEARS

The final segment of the planning meeting was an evaluation and discussion of what the future could (or should) hold for the Stewardship Division, led by Harry. Consideration was given to the following specific topics:

- Responsibility (recognize who we report to, what values we uphold, etc.)
- Services (determine the hierarchy of “things” that we do)
- Tools (identify what we need to do our jobs better and more efficiently)

The larger group was randomly divided up into 3 smaller groups to discuss all 3 topics. The ideas from the 3 groups are summarized below, in no particular order. Some ideas fall into multiple categories, and “new” opportunities or needs are denoted with an asterisk:

Responsibility

- Be relevant!
- Protect conservation values identified in each deed of easement
- Enforce deed restrictions/easement compliance
- Build/enhance landowner relationships
- Build/enhance third-party partnerships
- Provide referral services to other state agencies on utility/infrastructure projects
- Increase public relations and education (youth, new landowners, etc.) *
- Additional staffing to maintain ever-expanding portfolio*
- Maintain continuity of operations (COOP) to absorb staffing changes/losses/additions through consistent implementation of policies and procedures*
- Accept responsibility as “spokesperson/authority” on conservation easements in VA*
- Staff willingness to utilize new tools if they are provided*
- Financial security! *

Services

- Provide deed interpretations
- Provide referral services to other state agencies on utility/infrastructure projects
- Provide special services such as Amendments, BLAs, etc.
- Connect landowners with other public, educational, and/or financial services*

- Provide opportunities/make connections for landowners and scientific studies (Blue Ridge PRISM, etc.) *
- Increase public relations and education (youth, new landowners, etc.) *
- Increased public access (especially on urban easements) *
- Each region could have a VOF Owned-Land Preserve as a public showcase for BMPs*
- Each region could have private "showcase properties" for specific uses or BMPs: ag conservation, timber management, buffers and fencing, wine, cider, weddings, etc.*
- Bicycle and water (canoe/kayak) trail tours highlighting easement properties (revenue opportunity for advertising) *
- Provide advertising for property sales/leases on Website and/or newsletter (revenue opportunity) *
- Staff consulting on specific topics (revenue opportunity) *

Tools

- Simplified easement template
- Locality coordination for auto-notification of plans, permits, etc. (expand statewide)
- Maintain online access to deeds and other courthouse information, etc.
- Revise current monitoring methodology/frequency
- Increased telecommuting/mobility/management flexibility
- Increased use of social media
- Increased use of volunteers for monitoring and office tasks
- Increased budget for staff training and development
- New database to manage all records*
- Field laptops/tablets (or expand use of iPhones) for "real-time" data collection*
- Drones and other remote monitoring opportunities (Planet Imagery, etc.) *
- Work-Study Program and/or Fellowship Program with local colleges and universities*
- Increased/improved legal enforcement (legislative authority to levy and collect fines) *
- Increased exposure and positive stories through media/celebrities (several famous people own easement properties) *
- Subcontract monitoring duties to third parties*
- Digitize ALL files statewide and transition to all-digital file access with a central storage location for hard copies*

At least half of these ideas for the future are new opportunities for VOF, and will require additional staff time and dedication to develop, including coordination with the SMT and other VOF division staff members.

SUMMARY

After the meeting, all attendees felt energized and empowered to continue the brainstorming, conversation, and commitment to improve the Stewardship Division, and in-turn, the rest of VOF. After reviewing all the data collected, the following is a list of the most consistent and popular ideas for implementing positive change. These should drive future decision making for the SMT and BOT, and should be highlighted in the future VOF strategic planning initiative:

1. Finalize a mission statement for the division (and for VOF)
2. Fund the development and implementation of a new property database to reduce or remove redundancies in tracking issues and monitoring (increase staff efficiency)
3. Streamline monitoring by reducing the frequency of visits and increasing the use of current mobile technology for forms, photos, maps, etc.
4. Reduce or remove paper files, forms, etc. (go completely digital and centralize records)
5. Maintain and improve online access to deeds and other courthouse information, etc.
6. Implement a “peer review” system for requests, issues, violations, etc. like the “Stage 1” meeting used by easement staff (bi-monthly)
7. Update and streamline policies and procedures to ensure consistency and continuity, and to create a balance between being thorough and being effective
8. Introduce enabling legislation in the General Assembly to levy fines for violations
9. Seek opportunities for new revenue sources (tours, advertising, festivals, fees, etc.)
10. With additional funding, increase compensation for existing staff (increase morale)

NEXT STEPS

This report will be provided to the SMT and the BOT for their knowledge and feedback. It will then be included as a part of the future agency-wide VOF strategic planning initiative later in 2017. Stewardship Management staff will earnestly seek to implement the “Top 10” list above with the current and existing resources that we have, specifically creating a mission statement, streamlining the monitoring process, and updating and advertising the divisional policies and procedures. Hopefully, revenue sources will improve in the coming years, and the creation and implementation of a new database can be achieved to provide maximum staff efficiency.