



A Framework for Sustainable Recreation

White Paper 1:

Visitor Centers: Strategies to Support Special Places and Provide for Enhanced Communities



Presented by: USFS Recreation Business Advisory Team

Background

One of the core guiding principles of the Framework for Sustainable Recreation includes “Connecting People with their Natural and Cultural Heritage”. Traditionally, Visitor Centers have served to celebrate a special place and provide interpretation, orientation and recreation information. Over the past decade, Visitor Centers have broadened their offerings to include a sharper focus on enhancing the visitor experience. Visitor Centers host cultural heritage events and provide a venue for entertainment such as music, chautauquas, and storytelling. They provide the setting for unique experiences and orient visitors to a variety of recreation opportunities. With the right location, design and programs, centers can be more than a portal to other attractions - they can become important visitor destinations in their own right. Visitor Centers have also become recognized as an important element in a local area’s hospitality and tourism inventory. Visitor Centers can enhance the branding of the destination and Forest, serve to attract new audiences, contribute to longer stays, and increase visitor spending. Perhaps most importantly, Visitor Centers are playing an important role in fostering stewardship and connecting visitors with opportunities to participate as citizen stewards and volunteers. All of these outcomes directly align with the Focus areas of the Framework including, “Investing in Special Places and Enhancing Communities.” Improving the opportunities for these outcomes from Visitor Centers can be enhanced if the Forest Service continues to focus on three areas:

- Identifying the relevance of the current Visitor Center offering;
- Evaluating and understanding the local/regional market; and,
- Identifying if the Visitor Center is maximizing its fiscal sustainability.

The following paragraphs provide some questions to consider for Forest Service units interested in improving a Visitor Center’s sustainability and adding benefits to the surrounding community.

Understanding the Relevance of the Current Visitor Center Offering

Today’s visitors are interested in meaningful experiences and in learning all they can about a place and its surroundings. They want to see and do something special and access information and knowledge in personal as well as high tech ways. Since competition for visitors’ leisure time continues to increase, the expectations of the visiting public are high in terms of the quality of the education, entertainment and recreational product offerings. Visitor Centers must determine if their offerings remain relevant and meet the needs of visitors.

A foundational step in evaluating the effectiveness of a Visitor Center is confirming/ redefining the Visitor Center program and functions and how they are positioned in the market. To be successful and remain relevant, the Visitor Center must both meet the specific needs of the Forest and the needs of the larger community in which it is located. The following questions will help in evaluating your Visitor Center's relevance:

1. How does the Visitor Center, its functions, and the experiences offered fit within the Forest's current recreational offering and Recreational Facility Master Plan?
2. How have your facility's programs (classes, events, concerts, meetings) changed in the last five years? What are the usage trends for your programs?
3. How does your current programming address the needs of your community? Do your type of activities have continued relevance to various age groups and populations?
4. What are the usage rates of the other visitor center core functions (e.g. retail, food service and visitor amenities, meeting space, rental, etc.)? Are the usage rates increasing, decreasing or staying level?
5. What is the age and condition of your interpretive exhibits, and do the interpretive themes and messages continue to resonate with your market? Are messages effectively communicated and are they understood by today's visitors?
6. Does your exhibit suite meet visitors' need for orientation information without requiring staff time?
7. How does your community describe the Visitor Center's product/market position?
8. What does the community believe is the value of the Visitor Center to the community?
9. Is your Visitor Center a gathering place for the community?
10. Does the community support your Visitor Center with a robust volunteer program?



Understanding the **Market Opportunity**

The market opportunity for a Visitor Center and its associated assets depends on having a market for defined uses that can be financially supported. A market analysis for a visitor center includes an evaluation of the competitive supply of similar facilities and experiences, both on and off the Forest. It also includes an assessment of the demand potential for the facility and experiences offered (e.g. visitation potential). These questions will aid in identifying your Visitor Center's market:

1. What would the Forest Service and Community consider as the market drawing areas for your Visitor Center?
2. What is the population/tourist visitation within that market area, how has it changed over the last five years and is it anticipated to change in the next five years?
3. What are the current economic and demographic trends for the local and regional area? How have they changed in the last five years? How are they anticipated to change in the next five years?
4. What are the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of current and potential users?
5. Are similar facilities and experiences available elsewhere on the Forest? Where are they in relation to significant resources and areas of high visitation?
6. Are similar facilities and experiences available adjacent to the Forest? Who are the owners/managers of these facilities? How are these facilities operated and what are their site attributes?
7. What is the performance of these facilities (annual visitation, seasonality of demand, price points, and types and origins of users?)
8. What are the sources of revenues and expense profiles of these facilities? Are they covering their total costs? Do these facilities have an endowment?

Planning for **Financial Sustainability**

Financial sustainability begins with understanding how to position the Visitor Center product within the market to maximize its revenue potential. It also requires an awareness of whether your operating partner, frequently a nonprofit group, is maximizing its opportunities for both earned and contributed income. Finally, having a full understanding of operating and facility costs can complete the financial picture. Some questions to consider in evaluating Visitor Center financial sustainability include:

1. What are the existing earned income revenue opportunities (e.g. retail, food and beverage, vending, program revenue, special events, rental space, etc.) at the Visitor Center and what have been their trends over the past five years?
2. What are the opportunities for expanding earned income opportunities?
3. What would it take to create these opportunities?
4. How does the product pricing of these options compare with those at surrounding Forests and similar products in your region?
5. Are there options to increase the price points and lower the operating costs at the Visitor Center? If so, what are the impacts of these decisions?
6. Does your operating partner (e.g. Interpretive Association or Friends group) have a strategy for contributed income (e.g. individual, corporate, and philanthropic dollars)?
7. Does your operating partner have the skill sets to understand how to maximize both earned and contributed income opportunities?
8. How have the operating costs (e.g. direct, indirect and fixed) for the facility changed over the last five years?
9. Have you recognized the full costs of ownership of your assets (e.g. day to day maintenance, cyclic maintenance and component renewal)?
10. What is the net income potential based on the activities and offerings at the Visitor Center?

Opportunities for Visitor Center Enhancements

The previous questions may have identified opportunities for improvement of the Visitor Center operations. If so, the next question is how to proceed to overcome shortfalls and maximize opportunities for improvement. Addressing the opportunities can occur several ways, depending on your circumstances.

Relevancy: If you found that your Visitor Center is no longer relevant to your visitors, it is time to reevaluate your facility and consider new ways for it to enhance your community. It is recommended to evaluate and re-imagine the possibilities and potential of your Visitor Center at least every five years. Preparing the answers to the preceding questions and then working through a structured dialogue as to what the Visitor Center could be with colleagues on the Forest, as well as your partner(s) and the community, is an important first step. Having a third party facilitate these discussions may prove to be helpful. Such a facilitator provides a neutral perspective and can ask the tough questions about performance and relevancy as well as provide ideas for best practices and new opportunities.

Market Opportunity: The previous questions will identify whether the Visitor Center's market is stable, declining or expanding. The surrounding communities economic, demographic and tourism position will affect how you approach your future opportunities. Opportunities can exist within each of these situations. Creating a profile of the economics, demographics and competition of your market is an important first step in understanding your Visitor Center's market potential. Evaluating this information plus your "relevancy" will allow you to begin to understand your market opportunity.

Financial Sustainability: Planning for long-term sustainability begins by creating a realistic financial profile of your facility. By gathering the information that the preceding questions outlined, a financial statement for the facility can be created. Discussions with your partners will begin to assist you in identifying and evaluating revenue opportunities and/or sharing or eliminating costs. If the financial situation does not appear to be sustainable, there may be an opportunity to leverage some new ideas for how that could be accomplished. In most instances there are strategies available to enhance long term sustainability. Implementation plans would be the next phase in the process.



We Have **Targeted Expertise & Experience**

in Your World

The Forest Service has a team of professionals versed in Visitor Center planning, design, operations and financing who are part of the USFS Recreation Business Advisory Services IDIQ. This sole source IDIQ allows Forests to leverage the experience and expertise of external business advisors to address issues that Forest Service staff is facing in relation to a wide variety of Recreation, Wilderness and Heritage issues. This team is available to support you in evaluating the relevancy of offerings, market opportunities, planning, and financial sustainability strategies for Visitor Centers as well as implementing the strategies and enhancements necessary to achieve enhanced community benefits and economic sustainability. Specifically, the IDIQ team includes:

- **CHM Government Services:** Market, financial and investment analysis for recreational facilities development. www.chmgov.com



- **Agnew::Beck Consulting:** Visitor center planning and programming particularly for multi-function visitor and cultural centers sponsored by Native tribal organizations. www.agnewbeck.com



- **Belt Collins:** Site design and planning for recreational land uses and interpretive planning and design. www.beltcollins.com



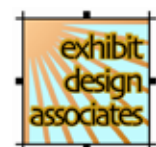
- **ConsultEcon:** Market, financial and operational evaluation of visitor center offerings and development of sustainable operating strategies that optimize outcomes and justify initial capital investments. www.consultecon.com

ConsultEcon, Inc.

- **Double K Outfit:** Visitor Center and Children's Forest programming, fundraising strategies (e.g. earned income, contributed income) and nonprofit partnership development. kk@doublekoutfit.net



- **Exhibit Design Associates:** Interpretive planning as well as exhibition design, fabrication and installation. www.exhibitdesignassociates.com



USFS Recreation Business Advisory IDIQ

The USFS Recreation Business Advisory IDIQ contract has been created to provide professional support services to Forest Service staff responsible for recreation management on National Forest System lands at locations throughout the U.S. and its territories. This sole source IDIQ provides all Forest Service units at any level (Washington Office, Regions, Forests or Districts) the ability to use this contracting vehicle. This vehicle provides access to professionals for services in the following areas:

- Strategic Planning and Program Management
- Financial Analysis
- Market Analysis
- Operational Efficiency Evaluations
- Partnership Analysis
- Facility Management Planning
- Marketing and Communications
- Interpretation Strategy
- Organizational Change Management

CHM Government Services is the Prime Contractor of the National Recreation Program Business Advisory Service Indefinite Delivery Indefinite Quantity ("IDIQ") Contract with the United States Forest Service (AG-02NV-C-09-0004) for the period 2009 to 2014.

For information on accessing this contract, please contact Margaret Bailey at m Bailey@chmgov.com and/or 978-232-3608.

