

DEVELOPING CITIZEN SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC LANDS -- USING CORPORATE PARTNERS, VOLUNTEERS AND "FRIENDS" GROUPS

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The State of Maryland has over forty-five state parks, many of which are located adjacent to the Chesapeake Bay. Traditionally public land managers have relied on funds from the state, fixed budgets, admissions fees and concession revenues as the primary sources of funds. At the same time that budgets for operations are shrinking, personnel costs are increasing and infrastructure projects are not being implemented leading to deterioration of facilities.

In order to respond to the above stated problems, the State Forest and Park Service has recently developed a whole system of management strategies which are allowing it to "do more with less." The key components of the new strategies are increasing use of citizen participation and corporate partnerships in support of the system. A corporate partnership program has been developed. Volunteer labor is critical and the utilization of "Friends of" groups has made a significant difference in how Maryland's state parks are being managed. In 1996, over \$400,000 was attained in donated goods, services, and sponsorships. Over 19,000 volunteers were utilized and over twenty-two "Friends" groups were established.

Utilizing Corporate Partnerships

Traditionally private businesses have not been asked to contribute to government operated programs and so the very first challenge to be overcome was explaining the rationale as well as the benefits of being associated with state parks. Businesses don't respond solely to altruistic requests. Maryland created a partnership program which offered businesses a chance to reach a targeted market of 10,000,000 visitors annually to Maryland's state parks. In exchange for financial donations or goods, businesses have received plaques, publicity, an opportunity to distribute discount coupons, use of park pavilions, or use of state operated cabins. In addition, another incentive is that businesses are allowed to deduct the value of donated gifts on state and federal tax returns.

An example of one of our partnerships is the one established with Gore and Associates, manufacturer of Goretex material which is used in the production of outdoor clothing, shoes and equipment. Gore gave Maryland a large cash contribution in exchange for an advertisement, on dressing for the outdoors, in our statewide brochure. Thanks to this donation we were able to double the amount

of brochures printed and Gore's message is in the hands of 200,000 persons interested in state parks. This donation allowed us to redirect funds allocated to printing to other areas.

In other cases, businesses have donated computers, saws, lawn mowers and vehicles. The advantage to businesses of giving pieces of equipment is that they can receive tax benefits for their donation. We have been very successful in attaining used or older model items.

Finally, a key principle to be maintained in a corporate giving program for agencies involved in protecting the environment and managing public lands is to assure that there is no commercialization of parks and that no harm comes to the environment as a result of a corporate partnership. Any signage should be small and tasteful and should be placed on existing structures if possible.

Citizen Involvement

Citizen involvement is critical to the new strategy of land management. Volunteers participate in operating facilities, help to implement environmental education programs and expand citizen stewardship to others through their work.

Every state park has a volunteer coordinator whose job is to recruit and manage the volunteers. Tasks range from trail maintenance to office work. Camp Hosts work twenty hours a week at camping sites in exchange for a free camp site. They often spend four to six weeks at a single location. Volunteer Rangers wear uniforms and assist the full time rangers in serving the public. Many of the volunteers are senior citizens who love the outdoors. A critical element in working with volunteers is having a viable recognition program. With over 19,000 volunteers donating their time to Maryland's parks and forests rewards range from free passes to free camp sites as ways to thank them for their assistance.

Working with volunteers requires a commitment from managers and a commitment of staff time to implement but once programs are underway the benefits derived from volunteer accomplishments far exceeds effort of staff. Once people develop a sense of ownership to a facility they become committed to its support. In turn they expand support for the parks.

Creation of "Friends" Groups

The development of "Friends" groups is another technique used to engage the public in participation in a park's operation. Each group is formed from a nucleus of volunteers who incorporate independently. The group then signs a memorandum of agreement with the park to assure that they will work cooperatively to carry out projects which will be beneficial to the park. Groups engage in fundraising - a major function which allows them to raise funds which are in turn used to benefit a park. Such funds are not

managed by the state and the "Friends" groups do not have to comply with state procurement rules, thus allowing them to purchase needed items without bureaucratic oversight. "Friends" groups have purchased equipment, signs, audio-visual aides, etc.

Other tasks of "Friends" groups are to increase local awareness of state parks and to sponsor events which lead to increased citizen stewardship. Two state parks located on the Chesapeake Bay have "Friends" groups which are raising funds so that Chesapeake Bay camps can be held for children. They solicit donations for equipment such as seine nets, boots, canoes, water quality monitoring kits, etc. so that children can receive "hands on" experience with the Bay.

One group has raised enough funds to build a rental cabin at its park. The rent received will be given back to the group until sufficient funds are generated to build a second cabin. Henceforth cabin rental will generate income directly to the park.

Advocacy on behalf of Maryland's public lands is another benefit of having "Friends" groups. Citizens who care about our sites have actively lobbied Maryland's state legislature to support laws which help fund the operation of public lands. In the recently completed 1997 legislative session citizens were instrumental in the passage of a critical piece of legislation.

Together the techniques stated above constitute a new approach to developing a sense of public stewardship and to serving as viable management tools for enhancing public land. The citizens who live around the Chesapeake Bay are actively engaged in preserving the public lands adjacent to the Bay. We need them and are grateful for their support.