

## INFORMATION PAPER

SUBJECT: Visitor Center Initiative (VCI)

CECW-ON  
19 May 2003

1. Purpose. To provide information on the initiative to identify issues affecting Corps visitor centers and the development of an audiovisual "Corps Story" exhibit.

2. Facts.

a. The Corps visitor center program was established in the 1970's. Currently, we have seven Class A Regional Visitor Centers, 53 Class B Project Visitor Centers, and 242 Class C Visitor Information Centers. While Class A&B facilities were intended as highly visited, staffed centers, Class C centers were established in existing facilities, such as project manager's offices.

b. MG Van Winkle, while Director of Civil Works, approved the CECW-ON Visitor Center Initiative (VCI) strategy paper on 27 September 2000. DCG MG Fuhrman initiated the action in May of 1999. A VCI committee was chartered and tasked with identifying issues confronting Corps visitor centers, developing recommendations, assisting in development of draft policy guidance, and to develop a "state-of-the-art" audiovisual "Corps Story" exhibit. The study was commenced on 16 May 2001.

3. In October 2002, the VCI reported the following:

a. The Corps is neither keeping pace with public expectations, nor the realities of managing and funding visitor centers. While other Federal organizations are moving forward with integrated approaches to visitor center management, the Corps visitor centers are loosing opportunities to get our message to the public and to serve our customer's and our agency's needs.

b. Twenty-three issues that impact the visitor center program, with recommendations, were condensed into five general categories: funding, improving customer services, administration, regulations/policies, and interpretive messages (see Tab A).

c. The committee recommended incorporating the Visitor Center Program into the Corps Strategic Communication Plan. Vision, mission, and strategy statements were developed (see Tab B).

d. The development of a "Corps Story" audiovisual program was initiated and is in the early stages of development. The concept is to create a state-of-the-art educational and interactive exhibit that communicates the Corps role in improving the lives of American citizens. The goal of the "Corps Story" design is to produce an interactive exhibit that is easily adapted to a variety of visitor center conditions; thus, permitting flexibility in integrating the exhibit into existing facilities. To insure all facilities receive the "Corps Story" display, HQ should fully fund this effort (see Tab C).

Stephen Austin/761-1940

Approved By: George Tabb

## Chapter IV

### Issues and Recommendations

After the exhaustive data collection process described earlier, the VCI Team identified and synthesized the following most significant issues and recommendations for solutions:

#### **FUNDING**

**A. Visitor centers cannot realistically compete for scarce funds.**

**Recommendations:** Incorporate visitor center maintenance and exhibit rehabilitation plans into OMP and 5-year work plans. Develop visitor center standards and incorporate them into the new Customer Service Standards. This insures visitor centers needs are included in the planning process on an equal basis with other recreation facility needs.

**B. A June/July 2001 survey of visitor center managers indicated 50% or more of their exhibits needed updating. The exhibits were broken or needed expensive maintenance or they contained obsolete technology and information.**

**Recommendations:** Develop special budget items for the backlog of all visitor centers and exhibit needs and include in the budget process. Where possible, use safety and accessibility issues to justify non-deferrable status. Have plans and specifications and procurement research done for important projects to capitalize on reprogramming opportunities at mid-year. Exhibit rehabilitation should be programmed for out-year budgets.

**C. There is flat or declining funding for visitor centers.**

**Recommendations:** Establish fee demonstration projects and use funds collected at for visitor center operation and maintenance and not to offset project budget requirements. Use partnerships with community groups and other governmental entities to generate funds for visitor center programs and facilities. Pursue additional authority if necessary

#### **IMPROVING CUSTOMER SERVICE**

**D. Visitor center managers do not have a mechanism for identifying visitor satisfaction levels of customer service or the effectiveness of exhibits; there is no current data to assess “value added” to the public.**

**Recommendations:** Conduct visitor surveys at each visitor center to provide critical information on visitor preferences, their interest and how they want to receive information. Develop methodologies that utilize focus groups, friends groups, and other ways of encourage community involvement.

The VCI Team submitted, via HQUSACE, survey questions for OMB approval, a series of questions directly related to visitor interest of Corps issues, the history and missions of the Corps, and other specific visitor center related topics. The other survey would gather data to measure visitor needs. A copy of the submitted questions is provided in Appendix M. As of October 2002 OMB had not approved these questions.

**E. Visitor facilities are located, resourced and sized with little regard for customer demand and visitor needs.**

**Recommendation:** Research planning criteria developed by other agencies that are used to assess demand for visitor information/orientation facilities, locate visitor facilities, determine information functions that need to be accommodated and space allocation within visitor facilities. Develop planning criteria that will assist decision makers in determining the need for visitor centers, as opposed to other facilities such as kiosks and wayside exhibits, both for new facilities and expansion of existing facilities. These criteria would be utilized to develop project master plans and interpretive plans which prescribe the appropriate media mix. These criteria are important tools for managers to decide the appropriate level of visitor services for their project.

**F. The appropriate location for a visitor center is not always on project land. Visitor centers are not always located in accordance with public demand. Current policy and authorities do not support location on non-Corps property.**

**Recommendations:** Review policies and authorities and develop clear guidance to allow off-project interpretive activities and facilities.

## **ADMINISTRATION**

**G. There is no recognized career path for visitor center staff.**

**Recommendations:** Career development committee should investigate job descriptions in other agencies for applicability to Corps. Establish and institutionalize visitor center program with clearly defined disciplines, duties, and job descriptions.

**H. There is a lack of information exchange between interpretive and visitor center personnel. There is little to no networking with Public Affairs Offices or Offices of History.**

**Recommendations:** Fully implement the Visitor Center program's Gateway site at <http://corpslakes.usace.army.mil/employees/visitcenter/visitcenter.html>. Establish an annual Visitor Center Training/Conference to enhance communications, promote sharing of ideas and solutions, offer opportunities to insure consistency in message and program, content and expression of the Corps vision and missions, and increase networking opportunities. Garner district and division support to place an interpretive/visitor center manager on division outreach and communications committee.

**I. Lack of training for visitor center managers and staffs.**

**Recommendations:** Establish periodic workshops for Corps visitor center personnel to cover topics such as partnering, A/V multi-media technology, program and exhibit evaluation, exhibit plans and preparing requests for proposals (RFP's), contracts, etc. Develop exportable interpretive training for temporaries, volunteers, and new Corps personnel (similar to the Safe-Self course).

**J. There is no clearly defined visitor center role or authority within the Natural Resources Management Program.**

**Recommendations:** Adopt the recommended vision and mission statements for visitor centers to redefine their roles and importance as corporate communication assets. Visitor centers also have a strong community focus by integrating into local tourism and educational systems. The new vision and mission statements will encourage corporate support and open the door to shared funding with non-profits and other governmental agencies. Interpretive objectives for visitor centers should provide the flexibility to tell both the community story and the partner's story.

**Vision Statement**

*Provide visitor center facilities that engage the public in a provocative and educational experience that encourages a broader understanding and appreciation of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the project.*

**Mission Statement**

*Insure effective communication between the Corps and the visiting public through the Visitor Center Program. This is accomplished by presenting a focused story that provokes interest, relates to the mission, and reveals why the mission is important to the public.*

**K. Visitor Centers are understaffed and are over burdened with non-visitor center tasks. These tasks are hindering them from effectively maintaining facilities and providing quality service to the public.**

**Recommendations:** Visitor centers should be adequately staffed and devoted to operating visitor centers.

**L. There is a general in-house shortage of expertise in the disciplines of exhibit design and fabrication, audiovisuals, partnering etc. and no mechanism for sharing the existing expertise, good ideas, or lessons learned.**

**Recommendations:** Establish an advisory group (or Masters program similar to the Forest Service program) that could respond to project requests for assistance. The members of the advisory group will function as technical experts and provide support on an as requested basis. Develop a “How to” manual for visitor centers. The manual will address different operation functions such as exhibit renovations, partnering and volunteers. Post the manual and various contract documents for exhibit development on the Gateway.

**M. Corps visitor centers are largely non-compliant with regard to universal design standards.**

**Recommendations:** Design visitor centers and exhibits for maximum universal accessibility, as practical. All new and updated exhibits and interpretive programs will comply with universal design standards.

**N. There is no existing structure to implement VCI team recommendations.**

**Recommendations:** Create a standing committee for visitor centers to champion VCI team recommendations. This standing committee would report to the HQUSACE proponent and consist of five subcommittees: Regulation/policy, Message, Administration, Funding, and Improving Customer Service. See Appendix N for organization chart and subcommittee responsibilities.

**O. The lack of visitor center funds is creating a backlog in updates and repairs.**

**Recommendations:** Conduct a survey that gathers information on backlogged repairs and updates for visitor center facilities and exhibits. The survey data will provide decision makers an inventory of backlogged work and would assist in prioritizing funding.

## **REGULATION/POLICY**

**P. Partnering constraints present barriers to accepting public support in the development and dissemination of information**

**Recommendations:** Investigate other agency partnering authorities to see if they should be applied to us. Develop approved templates and minimize legal review. Define training needs on partnering for employees and managers within Operations Division, Office of Counsel, Real Estate Division and Resources Management Office. Create staff positions where needed to support field with rapid development, review and approval of partnership agreements. Create handbook to address implementation, forms, financial accountability, etc., with regard to any partnerships including challenge cost shares, cooperative agreements, and partnerships with for-profit or non-profit entities. Develop budget and accounting procedures for multi-year partnerships.

**Q. Corps visitor centers lack agency guidelines for available partnering opportunities that can contribute funding, staffing and programming.**

**Recommendations:** Develop new policy guidance to encourage true partnerships where costs are shared. Revise policy guidance on cost sharing, cooperating associations, and use and implementation of cooperating agreements to fully integrate these programs with visitor center objectives.

**R. Current policies, authorities, guidance, and regulations have not kept pace with the program needs.**

**Recommendations:** Establish a Headquarters developmental assignment to draft authorities.

**S. Visitor center types currently define levels of service based on criteria unrelated to visitor needs.**

**Recommendations:** Change current visitor center classification requirements from message based to service based. Evaluate existing Type “A”, “B” and “C” centers using the classification criteria below. If the facilities meet these standards, classify them Visitor Center. If they fail the criteria test for visitor center designation reclassify them according to the project office information center criteria. There should be two definitions, one for visitor centers and one for project information centers.

Visitor center evaluation criteria are as follows:

1. Assigned staff, readily available to visitors, knowledgeable about the Corps. This may include cooperative associations, volunteer, contract staff, etc.
2. Open during peak visitation hours,
3. Is an fully accessible facility including restrooms, exhibits and programs
4. Adheres to existing interpretive services regulation
5. Has an interpretive plan that includes a theme and measurable objectives,
6. Has exhibits that effectively communicate the theme and objectives,
7. Interpretive programs are available,
8. Provides detailed project information – both printed and verbal,
9. Not necessarily located on project lands,
10. Has a mechanism for customer feedback.

Project information center standards are as follows:

1. Staff provides information in response to questions,
2. Open during regular business hours,
3. Provides project-related printed materials,
4. Located on project lands,
5. Has a mechanism for customer feedback.

## **MESSAGE**

### **T. The story of the Corps is delivered inconsistently in Corps visitor centers.**

**Recommendations:** Develop the “Corps Story” exhibit to communicate the Strategic Vision elements; water resources, environmental, infrastructure, disasters and war fighting. Spotlight the “Corps Story” exhibit as an excellent example of how visitor centers can be used to communicate this vision. Stress to corporate leaders the role of visitor centers as the Corps’ primary public interface for marketing and outreach.

### **U. Corps visitor centers lack a central and focused theme and generally contain an excess of messages.**

**Recommendations:** Provide theme development training as part of exportable training package. Visitor Centers should develop themes and objectives that are based on the mission and vision. Communication goals will include the national and regional Corps missions and visitor orientation to recreation opportunities.

### **V. Corps visitor centers lack interactive, engaging exhibits that are appropriate for children.**

**Recommendations:** As exhibits are updated, design a portion of them to be interactive, age appropriate, with clear learning objectives for a more exciting and memorable experience for children and adults.

### **W. Corps visitor centers are not responsive to non-English language audiences.**

**Recommendations:** Provide material in appropriate languages, where necessary.

# ***Visitor Center Initiative***

## ***Proposed Vision, Mission, Strategy***

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### **Vision**

*Provide visitor center facilities that engage the public in an entertaining and educational experience that encourages a broader understanding and appreciation of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the project.*

### **Mission**

*Insure effective communication between the Corps and the visiting public through the Visitor Center Program. This is accomplished by presenting a focused story that stimulates interest, relates to the mission, and reveals why the mission is important to the public.*

### **Strategy**

*Integrate visitor centers into Corps corporate communication strategy and serve local community needs through partnering.*

# ***The "Corps Story"***

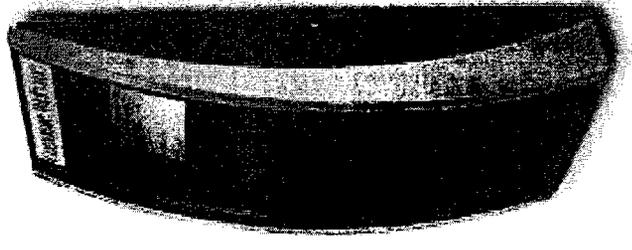
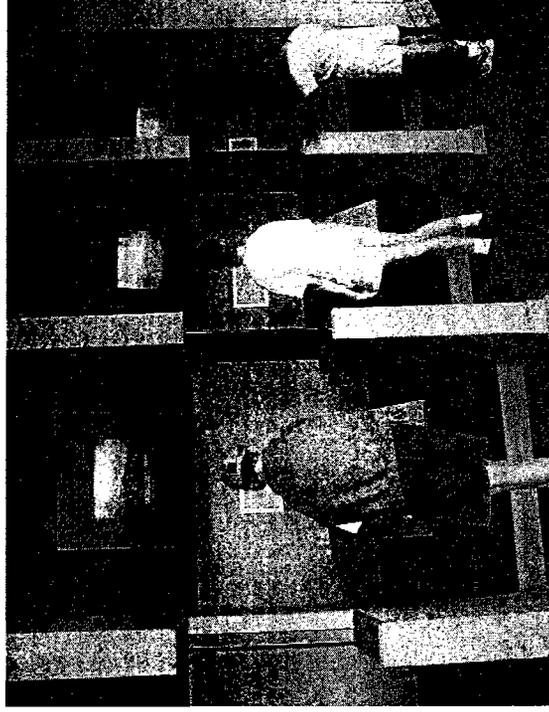
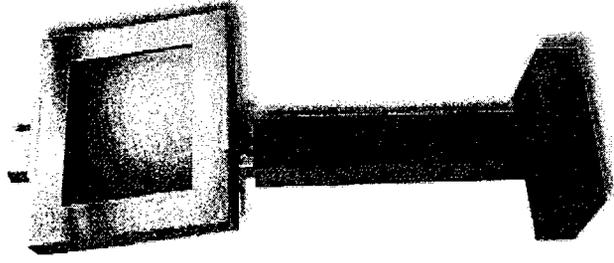
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- DCG MG Fuhrman initiated this action in May of 1999.
- The VCI study revealed a need to tell the "Corps Story" in a variety of venues, from project office lobbies to large Regional Visitor Centers.
- The audiovisual program shall be easily adapted to function in all visitor center facility or used in other settings such as theaters, classrooms and the Internet.

# *The "Corps Story"*

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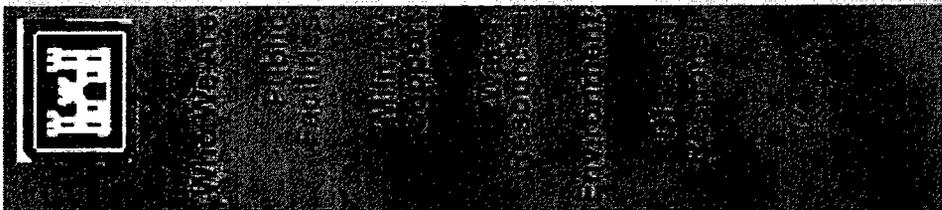
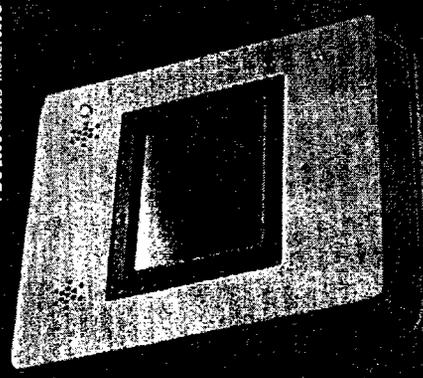
- State-of-the-art touch screen interactive video is envisioned to perform as a web-like page. User will choose topics of interest from menus.
- Allows design flexibility for costs and site conditions.



# Sample of Corps Story Approach

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PDC 2300 Series™ Model 300S



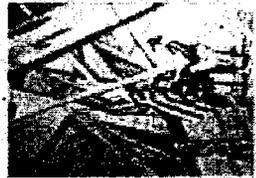
Explore the many stories  
of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers



The Dam That Floated Away



Ride With A Ranger



Helping the  
Heroes of 911



Rescuing A River Of Grass

Touch any image for a video story

