

Executive Summary

In 2003, ASLA Potomac Chapter President Adele Askhar asked Mary Ann Lasch, FASLA to assist in the design and implementation of a strategic plan update for the Chapter. The need for the update was based on the Chapter President's concern that the activities of the Executive Committee might not be in alignment with the members' desires. In the previous year, significant time, effort and budget had been invested in activities that were poorly attended to the disappointment and frustration to those who had planned them. President Askhar believed that the Chapter priorities needed to be identified and supported.

Framework for Analysis

A framework derived from the Balanced Scorecard approach was used to summarize the evaluation of the Chapter's organizational effectiveness in a complete and balanced manner. The four evaluation categories are listed below. Each one answers the associated questions:

Organizational Capacity:

Does the chapter have effective operating systems in place to perform its functions (e.g. communications, technology, accounting, membership tracking, chapter leadership)?

Volunteer Enthusiasm:

Are there adequate volunteers to support all chapter activities? Are the volunteers satisfied by and recognized for their contribution? Is there sufficient infrastructure in place to support the volunteers?

Member Satisfaction:

Do members get what they want and need? How does the Chapter identify member need and satisfaction?

Financial:

Does the chapter have adequate funds for its operation?

Findings

Existing Conditions

The key findings about the existing condition of the Potomac Chapter and the bottom line conclusion for each evaluation category are listed below.

Organizational Capacity

Key findings:

- Email communications is well-accepted and effective.
- Email and website are critical for Chapter function. The chapter does not currently have a reliable method in place to support communications.

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- Succession and leadership issues cause lack of continuity, especially for the office of Chapter President. The small size of the ExComm and limited number of committees results in a very small group of potential successors and leaders.
- Mission and goals (1995) are too vague to provide clear direction.

Bottom Line:

The chapter's organizational capacity is insufficient. Major improvement must be made in order for the chapter to adequately support its operations.

Volunteer Enthusiasm

Key findings:

- Members don't realize that volunteers perform all chapter activities.
- Lack of contact and communication to members limits participation. Members don't know what's needed; how to support the chapter, how to get involved.
- Volunteers are not recruited, recognized, rewarded, or trained to support chapter activities.

Bottom line:

There is no infrastructure to train and harvest volunteers to support the Chapter. This deficit in organization capacity directly weakens volunteer enthusiasm.

Member Satisfaction

Key findings:

- Members want professional education programs, more alliances with organizations with similar interests, as well as increased opportunities for networking.
- There is significant competition for the membership's professional time and energy. The DC Region provides many competing professional activities including programs offered by museums, cultural institutions, non-profits, and other professional organizations.
- In addition, ASLA's national office draws off chapter members to support national activities.
- Partnering with other associations and institutions has helped increase visibility and attendance, but not every partnership has been successful. Many members indicated they would like the Chapter to partner with the NBM. It is not clear if the Chapter has the resources to do this successfully.
- Until the 3/2003 survey, there was no effort to determine what members wanted from the Chapter. The survey is a good start and more effort is needed.
- The recent Happy Hours have been effective, especially for reaching younger LA's.
- In recent years, some chapter programs have failed due to extremely limited participation.
- The joint Annual Awards Dinner with the Maryland Chapter is a continued success.

Bottom line:

There are two responses to competition: increasing leverage of the chapter's resources through partnering and alliances; and utilizing our innate resources to produce programs strongly targeted to landscape architects. The issue of competition with ASLA should be addressed directly to determine if there is a way to share resources for the benefit of both.

Increased organizational capacity in communication and program planning would support member satisfaction.

Financial

Key findings:

- Chapter budget is modest, approximately \$14K/year.
- The major income is from dues and sponsors. To increase revenue we need more members and more sponsors. There appears to be untapped interest in vendors to support chapter activities through advertising and event sponsorship. There has not been a membership campaign in some time. The membership "situation" with the Virginia Chapter may also contribute to reducing the membership of the Chapter.
- Some programs have run in the "red" due to lack of participation.
- \$50 chapter dues are typical.
- The ExComm has been reluctant to consider a dues increase in recent years believing that low level of activities could not justify an increase.

Bottom line:

The current budget does not support a growth in chapter activities or paid staff. Recruiting more members, developing a program to significantly increase sponsorship, and/or raising dues could increase revenue.

Recommendations

The following list of criteria were developed by the Strategic Plan Workshop participants to describe the activities of a successful Chapter:

- Increases public awareness of landscape architecture.
- Offers vibrant diverse programs that foster member participation.
- Provides continuing and professional education programs.
- Increases membership by recruiting recent graduates and other landscape architects.
- Develops additional revenue to support expanded operation and programs.
- Provides organizational support to ensure consistency and adequate Chapter communications.

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These three program were the highest rated to help the Chapter achieve success:

1. Develop a reliable schedule of high quality programs.
2. Engage an Executive Director to supplement the all-volunteer effort.
3. Create a system to deliver email on a regular basis and develop a chapter web site.

In its final meeting, the Strategic Plan Task Force met to define the implementation initiatives for the strategic plan. Six initiatives were identified:

1. *Create a communications package* that provides an immediate email solution, evaluates the ASLA sponsored web site and templates as a short term solution for the chapter, and develop a long term solution for the chapter's web site.
2. *Strengthen chapter leadership* by hosting the Leadership Seminar and by hiring an Executive Director.
3. *Offer quality programs* by beginning to plan for the December Annual Awards Program and by developing guidelines for how to deliver successful programs.
4. *Raise adequate revenue.*
5. *Study competition issues with ASLA* and opportunities for alliances, start by meeting with ASLA to discuss competition and alliances between the Potomac Chapter and the National Office.
6. *Increase membership participation* and numbers of members by establishing an email/ phone tree to contact members in a more personal and immediate way and by sending thank you notes to all strategic workshop participants.

As of this date, some progress has been made on all initiates.

Bottom line:

The strategic plan update has been a critical effort to understand the chapter's strengths and weaknesses. It will not be possible to complete its implementation initiatives without the continued support by the 2004 Executive Committee and the members. The Executive Committee must make this implementation a high priority.

Summary of the planning process

A four-step process was recommended to accomplish the Strategic Plan Update:

1. Create a *Steering Committee* to plan and support the effort.
2. *Conduct data collection:*
 - Electronic survey for fast results and broad input from chapter members (and other LA's) to gain basic background and context. .
 - A series of 90 minute focus groups to dig deeper and understand more
3. *Utilize a workshop* to set direction and priorities, identify any some fast wins and prepare for actions that require longer lead-time.
 - Use a 4-hour workshop to review themes from survey and focus groups, develop strategies and set priorities for the chapter for 2003 and 2004
 - Use the workshop to develop action plans for implementing priority strategies, either by attendees or executive committee, as appropriate.
4. Executive Committee must *implement and monitor* the action steps.

Steering Committee

The Steering Committee met monthly from January through June of 2003 to plan and conduct the strategic planning activities. The members included:

- Adele Askhar, Chair
- Mary Ann Lasch, Process Designer and Facilitator
- Sunny Scully, Member
- Elizabeth Fischer, Member
- Cari Goetchus, Member

The committee began with a review of the 1995 Strategic Plan. They confirmed that the mission, vision, and goals were still viable today but were described at too high of a level to give guidance to the Chapter and the Excomm. The goals are listed below:

1. Broaden Public Awareness.
2. Expand Professional Networking
3. Expand Professional & Continuing Education
4. Improve Chapter Management.
5. Improve Chapter Communication

Data Collection

The committee undertook two data collection activities. A Zomerang survey that asked a broad series of questions and a series of focus groups that were organized by practitioner type.

The Steering Committee developed a survey to explore opportunities and concerns based on each of the chapter's 5 goals. In March 2003, the questionnaire was distributed electronically via Zoomerang to chapter members and by mail to those members that did not supply an email address to the chapter. In addition, some non-member landscape architects were invited to

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respond. A total of 85 responses were received. This was a significant level of participation level for any chapter activity.

The survey responses were used to develop the focus group agenda and to help understand the commonalities and differences between different types of landscape architects. The focus groups were held in March and April 2003. Each Steering Committee member organized a focus group and the Chapter President and President Elect attended all 5 focus groups.

The focus groups were:

1. Private Practice: Smaller Firms
2. Private Practice: Large firms
3. Recent Graduates
4. Academic Practice
5. Public Practice

The summary recommendations across all focus groups are listed below:

Best things the Potomac Chapter does now:

1. Email communication
2. Listing of local lectures, speakers
3. Big name lectures
4. Happy hours
5. Awards banquet
6. Local touch (vs. national)

Missed opportunities:

1. Not enough outreach to LA community
 - Student - chapter connection and communication
 - Mentoring students
 - Reaching out to chapter members
 - Reaching out to younger LA's
2. Little visibility in the larger professional community
 - NBM alliance
 - Not getting involved with AIA
3. Put more on website
4. Provide a forum for all that LA's do
5. Digital newsletter
6. Unclear mission
7. Career diversity
8. Visiting construction projects

Strategic Plan Workshop

On April 26, twenty landscape architects attended a 4 hour workshop to review the findings from the survey, the focus groups, and a report from the ExComm on

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the existing conditions of the chapter. The participants then identified criteria for a successful chapter.

The following list of criteria describe the actions of a successful Chapter:

- Increases public awareness of landscape architecture.
- Offers vibrant diverse programs that foster member participation.
- Provides continuing and professional education programs.
- Increases membership by recruiting recent graduates and other landscape architects.
- Develops additional revenue to support expanded operation and programs.
- Provides organizational support to ensure consistency and adequate Chapter communications.

A series of actions that the chapter could implement to become more successful were proposed and prioritized. The top three actions were discussed and scoped for implementation. The top three recommendations were:

1. Develop a reliable schedule of high quality programs
2. Engage and Executive director to supplement the all-volunteer effort
3. Create a system to deliver email on a regular basis and develop a chapter web site.

Implementation initiatives

On May 19, The Strategic Plan Task Force met to discuss initiatives for the development of the strategic plan. Six initiatives were identified:

1. *Create a communications package* that provides an immediate email solution, evaluates the ASLA sponsored web site and templates as a short term solution for the chapter, and look at long term direction and needs.
2. *Strengthen chapter leadership* by hosting the Leadership Seminar and by hiring an Executive Director.
3. *Offer quality programs* by beginning to plan for the December Annual Awards Program and by developing guidelines for how to deliver successful programs.
4. *Raise adequate revenue to support expanded Chapter operations.*
5. *Study competition issues with ASLA* and opportunities for alliances, start by meeting with ASLA to discuss competition and alliances between the Potomac Chapter and the National Office.
6. *Increase membership participation* and numbers of members by establishing an email/ phone tree to contact members in a more personal and immediate way and by sending thank you notes to all strategic workshop attendees.

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The initiatives were staffed as follows:

Initiative

1. *Create a communications package*
2. *Strengthen chapter leadership*
 - *Leadership seminar*
 - *Executive Director*
3. *Offer quality programs*
 - *December Mtg.*
 - *Program Guidelines*
4. *Raise adequate revenue*
5. *Study competition issues with ASLA*
6. *Increase membership participation*
 - *Email/ Phone tree*
 - *Thank you's*

Committee

Cari Goetchus, Kristi Farnsworth, Hui Ward , & Faye Harwell

Adele Askhar, Mary Ann Lasch, Rob Tilson, Brian Ray, & Cari Goetchus

Sunny Scully, Elliott Rhodeside, & Bob Goode

Heather Hammatt, Kristen (EDAW?), Kurt von Sternberg, Mike Mastrota & Rob Tilson

Heather Hammatt, Charles Trace, Faye Harwell, Keely Dunaway, Glenn Bayfield

Not staffed (Chapter Treasurer)

Rob Tilson, Adele Askhar, Mary Ann Lasch, Jon Parsons, Jeff Lee

Sunny Scully & Brian Ray

Heather Hammatt