

CHAPTER 5 - VISITOR CENTER PROGRAM

5-1. Purpose. This chapter establishes guidance governing planning, development, management, and operation of USACE Visitor Center facilities at civil works water resource projects.

5-2. Program Goals and Objectives. Visitor Center operation is a necessary and integral part of total project management. The primary purpose of the Visitor Center program is to provide interpretive information to the visiting public about the Corps, its mission, the project and its facilities, visitor safety, and the geographic area where the project is located. Visitor Centers provide the information necessary to visitors for safe and enjoyable use of Corps facilities. Exhibits and other interpretive communications should be designed to stimulate interest and convey information. The interpretive objectives of visitor centers are to:

- a. Enhance the public's understanding of the multidimensional role of the Army and the Corps and their contributions to the Nation.
- b. Enhance the public's understanding of the purpose and operation of the project, its archeological, historic, man-made, natural, and cultural features.
- c. Develop public appreciation for the proper and safe use of project resources.
- d. Foster the spirit of personal stewardship of public lands.
- e. Orient the visitor to the project and its recreational opportunities.
- f. Aid project personnel in accomplishing management objectives.
- g. Reduce overall project operation and maintenance costs.

5-3. Guidance.

a. The Corps of Engineers is responsible for providing information to the visiting public at every project it operates through a Type A Regional Visitor Center, a Type B Project Visitor Center, or a Type C Visitor Information Center.

b. Project personnel manage and operate, or oversee contract operations of, Visitor Centers at water resource development projects. Visitor Centers educate and inform the public with regard to the history and mission of the Corps, its role in water resources development, the project, its purpose, benefits and costs. Visitor Centers are further operated to ensure the public is provided with the information necessary for the safe use and enjoyment of Corps projects.

c. Visitor Center Types. Visitor Centers are classified into three types based upon their authorization, size, facilities, and program scope. The basic objective of serving and informing the visiting public is common to all.

d. Maintenance. Corps facilities available to the public are subject to the highest standards of maintenance, both inside structures and on the surrounding grounds. This maintenance function may be performed either in-house or by contract personnel. These services should be scheduled for non-operational hours.

(1) All equipment used in Visitor Centers should be generic off-the-shelf products, selected for dependability, ease of maintenance, longevity and low operating costs.

(2) A contract or other type agreement should be negotiated for any equipment repairs beyond the skills of the staff. Backup equipment should be available to maintain display operations.

e. Security. Security features should be included in the Visitor Center. Many of these features may be passive in nature such as proper lighting, adequate locking systems and key control, unobstructed views of windows and entrance ways, and alarm systems. At many Visitor Centers, adjacent facilities such as powerhouses, may require restricted access which will be controlled by others. Additional security for these areas may be provided by the Park Ranger staff or contract law enforcement personnel.

f. Audio/Visual Equipment. When old equipment is replaced, or upgraded, and new displays are developed, every effort will be made to purchase generic, highly dependable, off-the-shelf equipment with low maintenance costs, that can be readily repaired or replaced. Audio/visual presentation equipment changes rapidly, making it necessary to purchase equipment that has the capability of being upgraded. New purchases should be coordinated through the District or MSC Information Management Office to ensure uniformity.

g. Development and Distribution of Brochures.

(1) Development and funding procedures must follow those established by the District and Division.

(2) All brochures must meet the guidelines provided in the Graphics Standards Manual (EP 310-1-6). Information that may become quickly outdated, such as hours of operation, special events, etc., should be in the form of inserts, or special handout materials. Each center should conduct a regular review of the effectiveness, accuracy, and relevance of each brochure.

h. Visitor Center and Exhibit Evaluations. The objective of the visitor center evaluation is to insure that exhibits, facilities, and procedures are in good condition and up-to-date. Specific evaluation procedures may be developed by the district.

(1) All Visitor Centers and exhibits will be reviewed at least once every five years by a district level review team. The review team will consist of one representative from each of the following Division office elements: public affairs, natural resources management, information management, engineering, and history (if available).

(2) The purpose of the review is to ensure that all facilities are safe and adequate, equipment is in operating condition, and that audio-visual presentations, photographs, taped messages, and other interpretive materials are accurate and up-to-date. The review team will forward their final inspection report to the District Commander who will determine what changes, if any, will be made. A copy of Regional Visitor Center evaluations will be provided to the MSC. A sample Visitor Center checklist is shown in Appendix C.

5-4. Planning Guidelines. The master plan or the supplement (if necessary) should address visitor center facilities and program requirements in general terms. The planning process for any

Visitor Center construction, or major rehabilitation of an existing facility will include the following components:

a. When major rehabilitation or construction is approved, the Visitor Center concept will be developed prior to the design memorandum. This will include a project visitation analysis, an analysis to determine the proper type of Visitor Center required, and the identification of the interpretive themes and objectives. The development of the concept stage of the Visitor Center will be accomplished substantially by the project staff with coordination and support of the other District elements. If contractors are used, the Corps will coordinate closely to ensure that the final product meets the objectives in paragraph 5-2. Conversion of existing project buildings to Type C Visitor Centers through the use of an in-house team of subject matter experts and construction experts is not considered to be major rehabilitation.

b. An interpretive prospectus for the Visitor Center will be prepared by either Corps or contract personnel. An interpretive theme(s) will be identified and developed, which describes the importance of specific resources, sites, or programs in relation to the project. These general statements then provide the basic subject matter for the development of interpretive objectives and storyline for the Visitor Center. The interpretive prospectus will include the following: a summary of the decisions reached during the concept process, the basic design criteria for the Visitor Center structure, site selection, site development, structural elements, interior treatment, and traffic flows. The prospectus will show the relationship between the concept decisions and the design.

c. In the case of major rehabilitation of either the Visitor Center building or exhibits, some of the design criteria in the interpretive prospectus may be negated by existing conditions. However, major rehabilitation may include site and/or building modifications, if they are integral to the new visitor center concept.

d. References found in Appendix A, contain additional information for the interpretive prospectus. If the prospectus is prepared by contract, Corps personnel will remain directly involved in the process in an advisory and review capacity. Sections of the prospectus dealing with the history of the Corps should be submitted to the Office of History, HQUSACE (CEHO) for review and authentication. Sections dealing with local and/or state history should be referred to the appropriate state or local agencies.

5-5. Visitor Center Design and Construction/Rehabilitation. A special design memorandum (ER 1110-2-400) will be completed for any new building construction, or major facility rehabilitation. The design memorandum will address site development, design rationale, architectural, electrical and mechanical specifications, and cost analysis.

a. The Visitor Center building design memorandum will be completed after the concept plan and concurrently with the interpretive prospectus to insure compatibility between the structural design and the exhibit design. The building should be designed to support and enhance the interpretive presentation. The design should provide flexibility to allow for future updating and modifications of content. Use of windows should be carefully controlled to permit effective use of lighting, efficient use of floor space and the use of a variety of exhibit techniques. The excessive use of windows will unnecessarily restrict interior development of the building. Energy efficient design principles and criteria will apply.

b. All Visitor Centers will be physically accessible for individuals with mobility impairments. All interpretive exhibits will be designed to be universally accessible.

c. Where feasible, consideration should be given to utilizing existing and desirable building designs from other projects, instead of initiating new designs. Plans and specifications are to be prepared for the Visitor Center/resource management office building and the interpretive displays. The designers should closely coordinate their work to assure compatibility from utility, spacial, and aesthetic stand points.

5-6. Cooperation with Other Agencies. It is in the best interest of the Corps to foster cooperation with Federal, state and local agencies, non-profit educational, or other interest groups and individuals in order to facilitate the operation of Visitor Centers. Agencies and groups such as the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, state environmental agencies, local conservancies, non-profit groups, universities, historical societies, etc., possess experience, expertise, exhibits, time, and interest that may be used by the Visitor Centers to better inform and educate the public.

5-7. Cooperative Agreements.

a. Visitor Center Managers may consider the development and use of Cooperative Agreements. These Agreements are between nonprofit, tax-exempt corporations established for educational, scientific and/or interpretive purposes and the Corps, acting through the District Commander.

b. Cooperative Agreements are in the public interest and provide services, programs, activities, exhibits, or materials that aid the interpretation, historical, scientific, and educational activities of the Corps and the project. Cooperative Agreements provide a wide range of opportunities for community involvement; through memberships, publications, program and special activities resulting in mutual benefits for both the Corps and the non-profit corporation. A variety of Cooperative Agreements may be entered into to provide support for the Corps mission and its natural resource management program.