INTERPRETIVE PLANNING - TOOL #2

Interpretive Plans

WHY DO YOU WANT A PLAN?

Interpretive Planners will tell you that there is no “right” way to write a plan; that there are as many different ways of writing a plan as there are plans. The first and most important step in starting the process is to clearly identify why you want an interpretive plan, and what you want it to do for you.

Here are just a few of the reasons why you might need a plan:

• All interpretive efforts are being conducted independently of each other with no continuity or evaluation of needs based on area/Forest goals.
• There is a need to improve the forest’s public image, and create consistency of key messages and communication strategies.
• There is a desire to improve the public’s understanding of, and appreciation for, the resources of the national forest and why they are managed the way they are.
• The forest wants to improve public involvement, garner new partnerships, and/or promote community commitment to public lands management.
• There is a need to develop a heightened sense of individual stewardship.
• Current interpretive, educational and information service programs lack adequate funding, prioritization, or integration.
• Staff needs a tool to assist in recruiting partners in interpretation.

Once you’ve decided why you need a plan, then you can name it!

INTERPRETIVE MASTER PLAN

These plans are typically written at the forest level, to bring together the entire forest-wide effort for interpretation. It tiers to other forest programmatic plans, and spells out over-arching goals, objectives, and forest-wide themes. It provides long-term direction for interpretive programs, facilities, structures, and services.

INTERPRETIVE PLAN – FOR A FACILITY, SITE OR AREA

These plans are more site-specific than a Master Plan, and focus on a facility, site, or special interest area of the forest. It is more detailed than an Interpretive Master Plan, and often spells out recommendations for specific media. It includes cost estimates for development, design, fabrication, implementation, operations, and maintenance, and outlines a timeframe with assigned responsibilities.
EXHIBIT PLAN

As you would expect from the title, this type of plan is specific to an exhibit or set of exhibits. It could pertain to a visitor center, a scenic byway, an interpretive trail – anywhere you need specific direction that can then be given to a contractor/fabricator for completion. The plan includes goals and objectives for each exhibit and specific text outlines, recommendations for graphics and images, and cost estimates. Depending on the scope and complexity of the plan, it may include draft text and conceptual designs.

INTERPRETIVE PROSPECTUS

An Interpretive Prospectus follows an Interpretive Plan, and is generally used to develop a large concept to the point where it can be “sold” for support through the funding and implementation process. It may even be used to solicit bids for design and/or construction of interpretive media. The Interpretive Prospectus includes:

• Description of, and purpose for project
• Target market or audience
• Objectives/desired outcomes
• Interpretive themes and strategies
• Functional use of space (bubble diagram)
• Design narrative
• Universal Design considerations
• Business plan, to include budget and funding (including partners), operations and maintenance costs (3-5 year out)
• Project schedule
• Project Team (list of skills and areas of expertise)

WHAT ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND INFORMATION SERVICES?

Certainly your plan can address these two program areas as well as interpretation. Here are some definitions to explain the difference among all of these communication tools.

Interpretation

*“helps the visitor feel sensitivity to beauty, complexity, a sense of wonder, a desire to know . . . It should help the visitor develop perception.”* (Harold Wallen)

Interpretation is

• An informal teaching technique
• A service provided to visitors that entertains and provides meanings
• A management tool that can be used to increase visitors’ appreciation for, and sensitivity to, the natural and cultural resources of the area.

Education

Education programs are distinct from – though closely related to – interpretation programs and information services. Both interpretation and information services provide useful and relevant information about natural resources conservation, but neither provides the structured and formal curriculum-based series of experiences that characterize education. Frequently, education programs are targeted for a specific age group and have a captive audience, such as a school group.

Information Services

Visitor information services aim to provide information, orientation, and awareness of Forest Service programs, activities, and services. Through both personal and non-personal information, the public is made aware of how they can make use of, and benefit from national forest lands, facilities, and services.

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE? HOW MUCH WILL IT COST?

You won’t like this answer but….. “it depends.” Factors that influence these answers include:

• Scope and complexity
• Availability of forest staff to participate in the planning process
• Amount of research and background information already collected
• Level of specificity desired

You should expect to pay anywhere between $5,000 for a simple site plan to $100,000 for a complex scenic byway or large interpretive center.

Please contact an Interpretive Planner with CDI for assistance in developing a cost estimate and timeframe, tailored to your needs.

THE INTERPRETIVE PLANNING PROCESS

Each forest will have a unique planning process tailored to meet their specific needs. However, the following process is shared as an example of how a typical Forest Interpretive Plan might be developed:

1. Identify the following participants and identify how/when each will be involved:
   a. Core Team – at a minimum, the team should include an Interpreter, a Landscape Architect, a Public Affairs Officer/Specialist, and a Recreation Planner
b. **Technical Advisory Group** – this group needs to be familiar with the area and its resources, and be able to get multi-agency input when appropriate. Members could include Interpreters, Resource Experts, and/or Engineers.

c. **Key Participants** - people who need to know what is going on and may participate at certain times. They will review products and support the accomplishment. These key participants can be internal or external to the agency.

d. **Decision Maker** – the person who approves the plan and is responsible for its implementation.

2. Core Team discusses:
   a. Purpose and need
   b. Goal for the planning process
   c. Interpretive objectives for the site/forest/exhibits
   d. Past, present and future desired audience

3. Technical Advisory Group conducts inventories with the level of specificity appropriate for the level of planning. Inventories may include
   a. Current interpretive media and locations
   b. Current themes, topics, and storylines
   c. Exceptional values and their locations
   d. Current condition of the site and media
   e. Site limitations

   A map should be generated to display the inventory.

4. The Core Team analyzes visitor analysis versus target audience, and existing interpretive efforts. Identify the needs that are not currently being met.

5. The Core Team identifies themes, storylines, and interpretive objectives (what the visitor will know see and do as a result of the interpretation).

6. The Core Team develops media proposals (type and location) and design criteria. Site and exhibit plans will include design templates and narratives.

7. The Core Team develops priorities, budgets, timeframe for implementation, responsibilities (including partners), and evaluation methods.

8. The Decision-maker approves the plan and implementation begins.

At pre-established milestones and as appropriate, the Technical Advisory Team provides review, input, and necessary support. The Core Team Leader ensures that the Decision-maker is kept apprised of progress and has the appropriate opportunities for review and feedback (including final approval).
THE CLASSICS


MORE RESOURCES

The National Association for Interpretation: [www.interpnet.com](http://www.interpnet.com)

The Visitor Studies Association: [www.visitorstudies.org](http://www.visitorstudies.org)

North American Association for Environmental Education: [www.naaee.net](http://www.naaee.net)