

The State of the Society:

A Report from the GWS President



The Board of the George Wright Society recently concluded its annual meeting and as I prepare to step down at the conclusion of my term as president and as a Board member, it seems appropriate to share with the membership a status report. In my opinion, the Society is strong as we begin 2003.

On pages 7 and 8 in this issue of *The George Wright Forum*, you'll see the Society's new five-year Strategic Statement in which the Board defines who we are as a Society and what we hope to accomplish over the next five years. There's always been some tension between the pride over what we accomplish well and the desire to become something more, and this subject of "who we want to be" is always a topic of vigorous discussion at Board meetings. We have now said that we want to grow about 50% in membership, and broaden somewhat who we reach out to. We've set some targets for growth that are ambitious but achievable. Critically, however, we have said that we are proud to be the sponsor of the conferences and the *Forum* and believe that those shall remain our primary "products." In other words, we do not intend to change the face of the Society significantly. While to some that may look like a statement of contentment and lack of ambition, I think it is a modest but forward-looking and realistic assessment of who we are and what we do best. Hopefully the Board will measure its progress against the

Strategic Statement each year so that we indeed do achieve the "stretch" goals within the five-year timeframe. Former Board member Neil Munro really pushed us towards the adoption of a simple, workable, strategic plan, and deserves all of our thanks.

The finances of the Society are sound for the time being, although the last two years have been tough ones due to the market's downturn. Early in 2002, at outgoing Board member Peter Brinkley's urging, we modified our investment mix to reduce the Society's stock market exposure. That decision did the Society extremely well this year considering the poor performance of the stock market. The anguish over that decision, however, and subsequent discussions about further refining our asset allocation, demonstrated amply that the Board needs to do a regular review of our portfolio, and an efficient means of making changes when they are appropriate. We need to measure our performance against benchmarks we set in advance, and be dispassionate about decisions to hold tight or move our assets, always while keeping

foremost in our minds the long-term goals for the Society. I'm very pleased that at this meeting we adopted a financial strategy that does just that, thanks to efforts of Dwight Pitcaithley. Still, we recognize that while we are in reasonably good financial shape for the short term, our long-term financial sustainability is worrisome, and so we've established a fundraising committee, led by Rick Smith. The committee's charge is to develop realistic, achievable strategies for raising funds that fit within the scope of the GWS strategic statement. Lastly, we made some decisions about membership dues, conference registration fees, and the pricing of our conference services that will improve our bottom line. We hope the membership will be supportive, particularly of the dues increase, the first since 1992 (see "Society News, Notes & Mail" for details).

I'm very pleased to report that we (finally) established a framework, and set aside funds, for a modest retirement program for Executive Director Dave Harmon this year, something that is long overdue. We will match Dave's tax-deferred contributions up to 5% of his salary. We also brought Emily Dekker-Fiala onto the staff, on a part-time basis, which has been an outstanding decision and has both improved our capability and provided some modest stability for Emily as well. Previously, Emily has been a contract employee, providing conference services on a reimbursable basis.

The biannual conference, is, of course, the Society's flagship event, and in November the conference com-

mittee, led by Dave Parsons, reviewed the abstracts and set up the framework of the program for the 2003 conference. With the explicit addition of the NPS Cultural Resources 2003 component, this conference looks like it could be the largest and most successful to date. The prospect of travel freezes and budget cuts in the federal government, however, loom over the conference and threaten to derail it, and with it, the needed influx of cash the Society relies on in non-conference years. While this makes me very nervous, I'm also confident that the conference committee and the executive staff are monitoring this closely and will do whatever is appropriate if circumstances change. If the conference is successful, it's my hope that we finally lay to rest the myth that the GWS conference is primarily for and about natural resources, and that the cultural community embraces this venue fully. My hope is that we continue to have the broad and balanced participation but that we no longer need to label the conference as a joint GWS-CR meeting—that it is understood that a GWS meeting *is* for all resource management professionals.

The Board, of course, is the leadership body of your Society. The 2002 election was one of the most contested in years, and we are very pleased to add John Reynolds and Bruce Kilgore to our midst. With Rick Smith, that will now make three NPS retirees on the Board, an interesting trend. The Board has also appointed Jerry Emory, a research officer at the Moore Foundation in San Francisco. The Board at this writing is considering one addi-

tional appointment to fill out its ranks, but has not yet make that decision. The Board will be holding quarterly conference calls so the momentum of the annual meeting is not lost and we continue to make progress on our goals. It will be my pleasure to turn the president's gavel over to Denny Fenn, who will have a one-year term as president since he only has the one remaining year on the Board. In many ways, this will be a transition year as there are many new members of the Board and collectively the Board and the membership will have the chance to determine where we are heading for the next several years. We decided to make sure there are opportunities at

the April conference for the membership to talk with the Board to express its concerns and goals for the next year.

In sum, I believe we are in good shape and will be in even better shape in the next few years provided we use the strategic statement and financial strategy as guidelines and targets for our programs and actions, revising and updating them as needed when circumstances and goals change. It has been my pleasure and honor to be president of the Society these last two years, and a Board member for the last six.

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