



United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

4.A1(2500-CPM)

Memorandum

To: National Leadership Council

From: Acting Associate Director, Park Planning, Facilities and Lands

Subject: Visitor Center Futures Workgroup

The Investment Review Board (IRB) has sponsored the formation of the Visitor Center Futures (VC Futures) workgroup. This group was formed, in part, due to visitor center projects that have gone to the IRB and appeared to lack strong connections to the broader investment goals of the park, or the project lacked a comprehensive understanding of current and future visitor needs and expectations. For example, should theaters be rehabilitated and upgraded, or is there a new approach that better fits current and future visitor needs? The IRB continues to be concerned with the financial sustainability of all assets. Visitor center operations across the country require millions of dollars, competing with other priorities, including law enforcement, resource stewardship, and visitor services that are not tied to a building.

The VC Futures project is one of several studies and initiatives related to facility investments and asset management undertaken by the National Park Service (NPS) over the past 3 years including housing, campgrounds, and museum collections storage. These efforts have the primary goal of improving the understanding of the NPS asset portfolio and investment processes, aligning and articulating investment strategies, documenting needs, and generating pragmatic steps for efficiently planning and executing projects, and, most importantly, maintaining priority assets.

As you all know, there is no legal or policy requirement for the NPS to build, occupy, and operate visitor centers in perpetuity. Management Policies states “when necessary to provide visitor information and interpretive services, visitor centers may be constructed at locations identified in approved plans” and visitor centers “will be constructed only when it has been determined that indoor media are the most effective means of communicating major elements of the park story and that a central public contact point is needed.” For many NPS employees, the visitor center structure stands as physical manifestations of the local park and overall agency brand. This effort is being done with sensitivity to these feelings.

The IRB is fully vested in this effort and we will be participating at various points with the workgroup and the Lab at the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). On March 16, 2021, the IRB will participate in a three-hour workshop conducted by [Colleen Dilenschneider](#) of IMPACTS Research and Development (“[IMPACTS Experience](#)”). The workshop will cover the importance of visitor and market research, visitor subsets, trip planning, and leisure time decision-making as well confronting the issues of financial sustainability.

The work of the VC Futures group will be completed by the end of 2021. Work on visitor center assets will continue across the system. More than 200 visitor center facility-related projects are underway or programmed over the next several fiscal years. Maintenance, repair, and rehabilitation of visitor centers that are valued at \$2M or less net construction will not be delayed. However, until VC Futures work is completed, the IRB will review visitor center projects exceeding a net construction of \$2M only on an exception basis, and at the request by the Regional Director. Projects that have previously been approved at the conceptual design phase may proceed. In addition, no Project Scoping Assessments (PSA) will be scheduled for visitor centers in FY 2021.

Attachment