

What is the Preservation Payoff?

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As many of you know, my work for the SRI Foundation involves a lot of traveling around the country, teaching workshops on Section 106 compliance and doing technical assistance projects for federal and state agencies, private industry clients, and sometimes SHPOs. I've learned several important things as a result of this broad perspective on historic preservation activities across the country, and I'm going to use some of those observations to structure my remarks today.

The Problems

For one thing, I've learned that people who haven't ever worked in a state or tribal historic preservation office have no idea of the pressures of the job. Section 101 of the National Historic Preservation Act provides a whole laundry list of things that SHPOs are supposed to do:

- provide technical assistance
- identify and nominate properties to the National Register
- administer grants
- provide public information, education' and training
- assist Certified Local Governments
- maintain a statewide inventory
- and so on and so forth

And the law blithely ignores the fact that all of this has to be done in an intense (and sometimes toxic) political climate, subject to endlessly competing public interests, with dwindling budgets and staffing.

Virtually everywhere I go, SHPO and THPO staffs are feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, and demoralized. Workloads continue to increase while budget crises in the states and flat or declining funding at the federal level leave historic preservation offices stretched thinner and thinner. The decision of the Minnesota SHPO to close the doors one day a month is only the most visible of a whole range of dreary measures being adopted to cope with this slow-motion train wreck.

Given this problem, one of the other thing that I've learned in the course of my travels is good news: almost no one in federal and state agencies and private industry anywhere in the country thinks that SHPOs aren't doing *enough* work. In fact, many of the people that I talk to express a fervent wish that SHPO would *stop* doing any number of things! Now SHPO bashing is nothing new, of course, it has a long tradition in venues like the

American Cultural Resources Association listserv, ACRA-L. Back when I was still a Deputy SHPO, I first got to know a man who has since become one of my best friends when he used the phrase “pin-headed SHPO behavior” in a posting on ACRA-L. After a spirited exchange of views off list, we discovered that we shared more points of agreement than disagreement about what is right with and wrong with the practice of historic preservation in this country, but it was touch and go at first.

For all that I’ve introduced this issue using a humorous but true story, it’s a very serious issue and one that troubles me greatly. There is a lot of bad feeling and frustration and a depressing lack of collegiality and trust out there between SHPOs and those who should be their partners in preservation – agencies, consultants, and conscientious members of the development industries. I have friends in all those arenas of preservation, but I think my heart will always be in the SHPO world – I find that I often still say “we” when referring to the New Mexico Historic Preservation Division, even after all these years. And it hurts and depresses me when I travel and teach around the country and hear over and over again about the lack of trust and the absence of partnerships.

I suspect that most SHPO folks would say that the lack of funding and staffing is the most important issue that they face. Based on my observations over the past few years, though, I would argue that the lack of strong, positive relationships with preservation partners is an even greater threat to the long-term prospects for success of SHPO programs. Funding tends to be a cyclical issue (I *remember* the Ronald Reagan years and I see a number of faces around the room who remember those years, too); relationships of trust, once built and nurtured, are lasting.

In any event, by one of those rare, happy coincidences, it doesn’t matter very much which of these problems – funding and staffing or lack of partnerships – you find more egregious. Many of the same solutions apply to both issues.

The Solutions

Let’s first consider the problem of SHPO staff meltdown owing to funding and staffing cuts. When you have more to do than you can possibly manage, what’s the solution? The obvious answer, “Stop doing stuff!” isn’t really obvious at all. When historic properties are threatened on every side, any decision that you make to give up doing things could mean that historic places will be damaged, diminished, or lost. How can SHPO staff reconcile such decisions with their mandate in 36 CFR part 800 to represent “the interests of the State and its citizens in the preservation of their cultural heritage” ? And how can they reconcile such decisions with their own personal and professional dedication to preserving the past?

I would suggest that the ultimate answer to this question is triage based on a single question: What is the preservation payoff? Every decision at every level about how to allocate scarce staff time, funds, and other resources should be based on the answer to this question. SHPOs have a limited supply of bullets, both in terms of time and resources and in terms of ability to influence the actions of agencies, municipalities and

others. Those limited supplies need to be expended carefully and where they can do the most good.

One of the greatest impediments to basing resource allocation decisions on relative preservation payoff is an excessive focus on process rather than outcome. If you want to achieve the best deal for historic resources and save whatever is left of your staff's sanity, do whatever it takes to become focused on the outcome, not on the process. If I were suddenly declared to be the Preservation Queen and could mandate one single change in the way that compliance is carried out in this country, that would be it. *Let go of process, keep focused on outcome.*

One of the things that I do during my Section 106 training workshops is to divide the participants up into small discussion groups and have them work through various compliance issues for a made-up "undertaking." In the small group exercise on Resolving Adverse Effects, I ask them to begin by thinking about what each of the consulting parties in our "undertaking" will be bringing to the negotiation table. What does each party want? What issues will want to see resolved? What outcomes are they going to be trying to achieve?

And with a truly depressing regularity, the answer to my question "What does the SHPO want?" is "The SHPO wants to be sure that the process is done right." As a former SHPO, I find this to be disheartening beyond words. Not a word about finding ways to minimize impacts on historic properties; not a word about representing the interests of the people of the state in preserving their heritage; not even any mention of preserving stuff, for heaven sake. Just: "The SHPO wants to be sure the process is done right."

Did you know that a lot of agencies, consultants, and developers think that all you want is to be the Process Cop? When I was the New Mexico SHPO, my brother-in-law gave me this truly gorgeous police-style badge for Christmas. It has the state seal on it, and says "State Historic Preservation Officer" in very official looking lettering. But it was a JOKE designed to tease me about having a job title with the word "officer" in it, not a reflection of my view of my role in the compliance process!

Where does this perception that SHPOs want to be compliance cops come from? As Pogo used to say in the eponymous comic strip, "I have met the enemy and he is us." When I was the SHPO I struggled frequently against the process-oriented attitude of some staff members, and in my current role as a consultant, I have to tell you that I have met process-compulsive, "pin-headed SHPO behavior" head-on more times than I want to remember.

Sure, it's great to have consistency. It's nice to establish standards for historic property identification and recording, for reporting the results of surveys and mitigation projects. But you know what? In terms of federal projects and 106 compliance, it's not your responsibility to establish rules and standards, you don't have the authority to do so, and trying to police this enormous process will suck every bit of the life and huge amounts of time out of your program.

I had a fellow on my staff at New Mexico SHPO who was one of the nicest guys you would ever want to meet and, unfortunately, also one of the most process-oriented human beings in the universe. It was like it was hard-wired into his brain, and NOTHING I could do or say made any permanent or even long-term change in his modus operandi.

At least once a week he would come into my office ranting and raving about Agency X and some nefarious thing they had tried to sneak past him. He would go on and on until finally I would ask, “Did they protect the resources?” and he would answer, “Well, yeah.” And then I would ask, “Did they do something that vaguely resembles Section 106 compliance?” and he would answer “Well, yeah.” Finally, I would ask, “So what’s the problem?” And he would reply, “The PROBLEM is that they didn’t do part 2(a)(6/g)!!” or some such thing. And I would say, “And what would be the preservation payoff if we were to spend time and energy trying to *make* them do part 2(a)(6/g)? Would it make any significant difference in terms of resource preservation?”

And he would sigh and walk out my door. But the next day or the next week he would be back, and we would be having the very same conversation. Eventually we got to the point where he would come into my office, rant and rave for several minutes, then look at me and say, “But there is no preservation pay-off” and then turn and walk out without my ever having said a word. These discussions never fundamentally changed him – he couldn’t let go of his mania to be the compliance cop, and finally he left the agency.

The end result of a process focused, compliance cop attitude is that you spend huge amounts of effort on things that may make little or no difference in the preservation or protection of resources. And you develop entrenched, frustrating, conflict-ridden relationships with agencies and consultants.

Another process-oriented approach that drains SHPO resources and contributes little or no value to preservation of historic places is a stubborn insistence on reviewing *everything*. For example, how much time does your staff spend on case-by-case review of “no property” and “no effect” undertakings? In the larger scheme of things, how much do those reviews contribute to preserving the historic heritage of your state? Sure, every once in awhile you “*CATCH THEM*” screwing up or, worse yet, trying to “*GET AWAY WITH*” something!! But how much time and energy and mind-numbing, morale-killing review of rote compliance went into finding that one mistake or sneaky effort?

And if, instead of all those case-by-case reviews, you had addressed these undertakings programmatically, what could those staff people have been doing that would *really* have contributed to preservation? Public programs? Technical assistance to private owners of important properties? Promoting use of tax credits? Synthesizing data? Making information more accessible for researchers, owners, and the public? You name it, there is a huge need for it, and I’ll bet it isn’t getting done to anywhere near the level that you would like. And to what extent is this happening because half of your staff is bogged down in nit-picking stuff that doesn’t really payoff in preservation of the resources?

So, why do people hold on to process and to the compliance cop role? For one thing it is easier; it's clear cut, black and white, there are few hard decisions or choices. For new, less experienced staff it is comfortable and doesn't require the knowledge and judgment that more complicated preservation issues require. But mostly people cling to the compliance cop role because there is an adversarial attitude toward agencies, contractors, and others who should, in fact, be viewed and treated as preservation partners.

A certain amount of "us" and "them" attitude is inevitable in any human interaction involving more than two people. But in the world of historic preservation this is a human failing that needs to be combated at every turn. SHPO offices, federal agency CRM programs, private consultants – we all are struggling to do more and more work with fewer staff and scarce dollars. We can't afford the luxury of suspicion and sniping, of endless nitpicking and focusing on the details of process. There are plenty of enemies of preservation out there; we need to stop denigrating the other people who working to preserve the past and begin building stronger partnerships and relationships of trust with them. If you treat people like they are the enemy, they will become the enemy; if you treat them like allies and partners in preservation, generally they will live up to your expectations.

Unfortunately, focus on process and adversarial relationships become a circular problem in which each feeds into and intensifies the other. The more that SHPO staff focus on enforcing process, rules and standards, and trying to "catch" agencies or consultants transgressing against the rules, the more agencies and consultants resent being treated like unprofessional idiots and destroyers of the past. So the agencies and consultants respond by tuning out the content of what SHPO says – including the really good ideas and helpful expertise that you have to offer. Instead of focusing on preserving the resources with SHPO as their partner, they become focused on process too. "What do we have to do to get this through SHPO?" becomes the critical question, not "What would be best for the resources and how can we get it done together?"

So what can be done? Work with your staff on two things: First, make a conscious effort to let go of the self-fulfilling prophesy that agencies and consultants don't care as much about preservation as you do and have to be "watched" and policed. Work at building relationships of trust and treat people like partners in preservation, and that's what they will become. Treat people like adversaries and that's what they will be.

How do you go about building trust? You might suggest some of the following ideas to staff. First, avoid the obvious trust killers: Keep your promises; honor your commitments; admit your mistakes and remedy them, no matter what it takes. Express appreciation: Tell people what they did right as well as what they did wrong; remember to say thank you; acknowledge special effort – not only to the person who made the effort, but in an "atta boy" letter to the person's boss. Be professional. Don't gossip or snipe about people behind their backs; for one thing historic preservation is a small profession, and it's bound to get back to him. For another, the person you are gossiping to will begin to wonder what you say about *her* when she isn't around. Always keep professional disagreements professional; never let them become personal.

Another way to build trust is to invest in knowledge. Ensure that your staff have the skills they need and that they upgrade those skills as necessary. Consider staff exchanges; your staff could benefit greatly from spending some time working in the agencies they review and agency folks could get a real reality check from trying to do yours. Finally, invest in personal relationships. Meet face-to-face as often as possible. It is much harder to demonize a person if you get to know him or her. If something seems to be going wrong, drive over to the person's office or call on the phone and talk it out – don't sit around fuming or feeding your suspicions – and ask them to do the same.

The second thing that you can do to help your staff to focus on preservation payoff rather than compliance process is to spend some time with agency partners identifying shared preservation goals. Once you have identified the goals, work together on defining specific outcomes that you both want to achieve for those goals. And then (and this is the scary part for some SHPO staff) turn them loose to achieve those outcomes in their own way. Don't try to dictate how they do their jobs; if they are doing the right thing by the resources and working toward the outcomes that you all want, the means to those ends should be up to them. SHPO staff are stretched to the breaking point: critically important things that would truly contribute to preservation of historic places aren't getting done. Second guessing other preservation professionals is an expenditure of time and resources that we can't afford.

The funding and staffing crisis for SHPOs is reaching enormous proportions; something has to give. In these remarks I have suggested that what should give are attitudes and habits that do a disservice to the morale and mental health of SHPO staffs and, even worse, a disservice to the cause of preservation. Focus on outcome, not process; build trust with partners; agree on goals and trust people to achieve those goals in their own way; don't expend scarce time and resources on things unless they contribute to the goals.

We all got into historic preservation in the first place because we care deeply about the places that are part of our shared heritage and because we understand that this heritage and these places add richness and meaning to people's lives. We need to be reminded occasionally about the true meaning and purpose of our work

As I mentioned, the very process-oriented staff member that I described was also a truly nice person. Nearly every year he volunteered for a lot of extra work organizing our annual Heritage Preservation Awards program. One year we were giving an award to a gentleman from a village in northern New Mexico who had devoted endless hours of work to preserving a lovely little adobe chapel in the village – hand-refinishing the benches and wooden ceiling beams, replastering the exterior with fresh mud plaster every few years – a life's work.

Sadly, the man passed away suddenly only weeks before the award ceremony. In his stead, his entire family – his wife and several children from their 20s down to grade school age – came forward to accept the award. His wife spoke simply, but very

movingly of the man's love for this simple building and its importance to his family, his home, and his strong Catholic faith. And the whole family, including the teenaged boys in their macho, hip-hop, saggy baggy outfits, burst into tears.

With my own eyes brimming with tears, I looking at my disappointed process cop, whose eyes were overflowing as well. And I leaned over and whispered to him, "*This* is preservation payoff. This is what's important about what we do."

We need to put paperwork and process in the secondary role where they belong, and move our shared love for the past and our sense of service to the public back to the center of what we do.