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Standard practice

MHS develops technology tools and guidelines to aid web site development

by Shana Crosson and Marj Kelly

In today's technology-driven world, organizations that deal with the public are expected to have a presence on the Web. Most of Minnesota's county and local historical organizations are meeting that expectation; to date, over 80 percent can now be found online. If your society has a web site, you know the benefits – wider visibility, better access, improved customer service. But as many of you have learned, it takes

time, planning and expertise to manage a good web site. To help you fine-tune your online presence – or help you get started – a team of Minnesota Historical Society staff has developed web standards, in the form of a framework and set of goals, which you can use to gauge how you're doing.

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State funding cuts go deep

Legacy Amendment offers some good news

When it comes to Minnesota's biennial budget, there is one thing on which all parties agree: everyone will feel the pinch of the state's projected \$4.6 billion deficit.

The Minnesota Historical Society is no exception: in planning its fiscal year 2010 budget, the Society faced cuts on two fronts – an 8.6 percent reduction in state funding and losses among the Society's sources of nonstate revenue. The cuts will affect most major service areas and will mean layoffs or reduced hours for many Society staff. Among projected cuts: elimination of the microfilm labs, merger of library and collections departments, shortened library hours, and reduced services and shorter hours at some state historic sites. Further cuts are possible after July 1 if Governor Pawlenty exercises his unallotment option.

Despite this sobering news, the state's Legacy Amendment, passed by voters last fall, will raise new

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The Blue Earth County Historical Society's web site not only gives visitors access to its collections and programs but also offers many ways to get involved.

Standard practice – continued

Surveys point the way

Questions raised during the 2008 MHS Local History Workshops about web sites, computers, software and other technology matters made it clear you needed more information. To help us determine the range of your individual needs, we conducted a series of surveys in the fall. Your responses gave us valuable feedback that directed our efforts.

At this year's Local History Workshops, we rolled out the preliminary results – a working set of standards, guidelines and tools that will enable you to evaluate your organization's Web presence and use it to fulfill your mission.

The standards take shape

We modeled our standards on museum guidelines developed by the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). Those guidelines employ a tiered approach, using lists of standards that measure levels of quality from basic to good to better (see fig.1). This tiered approach to building a web site helps



To get the Fillmore County Historical Society online, executive director Debra Richardson chose a free blogging service to create this starter web site. She explains her reasons and the process at <http://discussions.mnhs.org/mnlocalhistory/>.

WEB STANDARDS

These standards or guidelines are intended to help organizations establish or maintain a presence on the Web. An organization's Web presence includes not only the web site but also the use of such services as Facebook, YouTube, Flickr and Twitter.

Standard #1 The organization has a Web presence.

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| Basic | 1. Information about the organization including name, location, directions. |
| Good | 2. Contact information (e-mail, phone, fax, mailing address).
3. Mission statement, board of directors, staff, program information (museum, library, events), public hours, membership. |
| Better | 4. Staff responsible for responding to incoming e-mail from web site.
5. Online access to collections, online exhibits and educational materials, retail.
6. Photographs of facilities, programs, events, etc. |

Fig. 1. Web standards example

you see where you are and where you have to go to get to the next level of proficiency.

Topics covered by the standards developed so far are web site content, maintenance, documentation, online collections information, online exhibits and retail. Yet to come are sections on accessibility and search engine optimization. We also plan to add best practices and additional resources.

You can find the current web standards in the Local History blog www.mnhs.org/lhtechnology. That's where we've also posted the survey results, a Technology Project Charter that you can use as a framework and planning tool for any kind of technology project, and a Web Standards Scorecard.

More to come

Consider these standards and tools a work in progress; they will be more

fully developed over the next year. Keep in mind, however, that they are never meant to be "finished." Rather, they will continue to evolve with the ever-changing technology. And they will be refined with input from you.

We want to know what information and tools you find most helpful. What did we miss? We'll be using a variety of means in the months ahead to get your feedback and insights, including the Local History blog, the Local History News e-newsletter and perhaps some focus group meetings. Finally, you can always direct your comments to David Grabitske, manager of outreach services, at david.grabitske@mnhs.org. We appreciate your input! ■

Shana Crosson is web content manager and Marj Kelly is senior web developer on the Minnesota Historical Society's Enterprise Technology team.

Taking the reins

Eight new directors sign on at Minnesota's county historical organizations

Each year the Interpreter profiles directors new to their jobs at Minnesota's county historical organizations. These eight community leaders have joined their colleagues across the state in helping to collect, preserve and interpret Minnesota's history. As the newcomers report, opportunities and challenges abound.

Becker County

To fill its museum manager position in February 2008, the Becker County Historical Society turned to a marketing/public relations professional and longtime area resident who could boost the organization's public presence. "I started by turning the annual meeting into a fun event, not just a business meeting," says Carrie Johnston, "and I've been out speaking to the Rotary Club, chambers of commerce and the public schools. It's beginning to pay off; we doubled attendance at our winter open house this year."

According to Johnston, her biggest

challenge is "getting a younger crowd in the door." To that end, she's networking with the Young Professionals group at the Detroit Lakes Chamber of Commerce and enlisting a younger batch of speakers to talk on topics of more recent history – the 1950s and 1960s. To make up for some cuts in county funding, she's also looking for creative ways to increase fundraising, like this summer's special-event partnership with a local filmmaker to premier his film on logging, based on research in the Becker County society collections.

Benton County

Longtime ties to the area and to the Benton County Historical Society landed Mary Ostby the job of executive director in June 2008. Ostby, from one of the county's founding families, served on the society's board from 1991 to 2004, taking the organization through a major restructuring. After stints elsewhere in special events and volunteer coordination, she's back, "picking up where I left off, putting my knowledge of the collections, society operations and the community to good use."

Among her priorities: technology upgrades and enhancements. "With help from some wonderful volunteers," says Ostby, "we're creating a database of the museum's collections to aid research and save wear and tear on the artifacts. We hope eventually to use the information on an enhanced web site." The society also

Benton County Historical Society



Mary Ostby

received a grant to create a PowerPoint presentation about its programs and services to boost community awareness. Among Ostby's other initiatives are a more formal volunteer program and the organization's first letter-writing campaign to broaden its base of support.

Fillmore County

It was genealogy research that first brought Debra Richardson to the Fillmore County Historical Society in 2001. Her family history work led to cemetery research, then to development of a cemetery tour and eventually to a job at the society, where she worked her way up from museum assistant to assistant director. Richardson was named executive director in March. Among her first duties: producing a book on the history of the 150-year-old Fillmore County Fair, to be released in July.

One big hurdle for the FCHS and its membership, says Richardson, is

Taking the reins –
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Becker County Historical Society



Carrie Johnston

Around the State

Taking the reins - continued

Fillmore County Historical Society



Debra Richardson

technological change. The society has created a web site (see page 2) and now offers its newsletter as a PDF file to members. "So far, only 38 out of our 340 members have signed up to get the electronic version," she reports, "because many don't have high-speed Internet access yet. But using the technology lets us improve our newsletter (we can use color online) and keep costs down." Another challenge for Richardson is making more space for collections. "Our main museum and two pole barns are full, which poses a problem for accepting donations," she says. "We hope to be able to expand our facilities within five years."

Lac qui Parle County

In May 2008 Barb Redepenning, a veteran woodcarver and rosemaler, signed on as curator at the Lac qui Parle History Center. There has been no shortage of opportunities to make her mark on the organization. "We're running summer and school-year

programs to get younger people involved," she says, "and both staff and volunteers are doing research in our archives to find the stories behind the people in our photo collections." One of the stories they're having no trouble telling is that of poet Robert Bly, a native of Lac qui Parle County. "His study was moved onto our museum grounds recently," reports Redepenning, "and he came out to do a program."

Lac qui Parle County Historical Society



Barb Redepenning

annual letter to solicit donations from members and is working to increase the roster of business sponsors.

Le Sueur County

History is about to come alive in Le Sueur County, thanks to director Tiffani Atherton, who joined the county historical society in April. She brings to her new job considerable experience in costumed interpretation, gained during stints at Split Rock Lighthouse and Historic Fort Snelling. That experience will serve her well as she takes on the role of a schoolteacher in the 1895 Elysian School, which serves as the county museum. "I'm eager to reestablish ties with our local schools

Le Sueur County Historical Society



Tiffani Atherton

and get kids thinking in new ways about how people learned in the past," she says.

Community outreach efforts will compete for her time with the work of maintaining and repairing the two-story brick schoolhouse, a National Register property. Atherton – who, with the help of volunteers, will be doing everything from fundraising to housekeeping – also faces the daunting task of reorganizing the collections. "We have too much in our museum that doesn't tell the stories of our local community," she says. "I'll be tapping Minnesota Historical Society staff for advice on the care and interpretation of our collections. It's a big challenge but it will lead to big rewards down the road."

Mower County

One county's loss was another's gain when Dustin Heckman left his curator job at the Martin County Historical Society last November to become executive director of the Mower County

Historical Society. He signed on just in time to help the organization complete its two-year MAP assessment. “The most urgent need identified in the report,” Heckman explains, “is to get the collections under control – cataloged and in climate-controlled storage. We’re in the process of inventorying everything to build a database of what we have.”

Heckman’s next priority is to attract a base of younger supporters. He is his own best strategy. “I’m only 24,” he says, “so I hope that seeing a younger director here will encourage people in their 20s, 30s and 40s to get involved.” Meanwhile, he’s working at raising the society’s visibility by joining the board of the local convention and visitors bureau, attending community events and speaking to civic and community organizations. He’s also overhauling the education program and doing outreach to bring in more families.

Mower County Historical Society



Dustin Heckman

Nobles County

Genealogy brought Carolyn Soper through the door of the Nobles County Historical Society nine years ago. Before long, she was recruited by the staff and put to work, her part-time salary paid by a state jobs program for retired workers. When the office manager job opened up in August 2007, she stepped in.

Two familiar challenges face Soper and the Nobles County society – lack of space and lack of funds. “With just two volunteers and me,” says Soper, who sought guidance from MHS staff, “we’re reorganizing our entire collection, inventorying artifacts and digitizing records to put it all in a database. Needless to say, it will take us a number of years.” Help may be on the way; a professor at Minnesota State University, Mankato is working to set up a fall museum internship for archaeology students. Soper is also working to recruit more local volunteers. She says with a laugh, “It’s not easy finding people who want to come and sit in our basement.”

Stearns County

Charlene Akers’s name may be familiar to many who know her from her work at the Otter Tail and Brown County historical societies in the 1980s and 1990s. After a stint in Texas, she returned to Minnesota in April to take the helm at the Stearns History Museum, succeeding longtime executive director David Ebnet.

Stearns History Museum



Charlene Akers

“I’ve begun implementing our strategic plan, building on a lot of the good things that happened during David’s tenure,” says Akers.

“Fortunately, I’m inheriting

many longtime staff with invaluable institutional memory.”

Work will begin soon on a 5-to-7-year plan to update exhibits, with new interpretations providing a modern-day context for the museum’s broad themes. Other goals include reaching out to diverse audiences, establishing a greater presence in outlying areas of the county and strengthening ties with affiliate groups. Says Akers, “Like everyone else, we need to be prudent about how we spend money and we need to find new ways to raise money. One idea we’re pursuing is to establish an endowment earmarked for broad humanities programming.”

New to your job?

If we missed you in this year’s roundup of top jobs at Minnesota’s county historical societies, let us know and we’ll include you next time. Just e-mail David Grabitske at david.grabitske@mnhs.org. ■

State grants-in-aid awarded in 32 counties

With the generous support of the Minnesota Legislature, the Minnesota Historical Society awarded 39 grants totaling \$147,325 in 32 counties during the winter cycle of the FY 2009 State Grants-in-Aid program. Applicants this year plan to use the funding to restore historic properties, implement and enhance exhibits and collections storage capabilities, and improve access to information.

Beltrami County: Red Lake Tribal Archives and Library, \$2,000, toward the Red Lake Tribal Elders oral history project.

Brown County: Brown County Historical Society, \$7,000, to research and plan an exhibit on the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862.

Carlton County: Carlton County Historical Society, \$2,500, for museum collections storage materials.

Clay County: Clay County Historical Society, \$3,000, for the Moorhead Latino Community oral history project.

Cottonwood County: Cottonwood County Historical Society, \$4,000, toward the purchase of a digital microfilm reader/printer.

Dakota County: Dakota County Historical Society, \$5,000, to inventory artifact collections.

Dakota County: Dakota City Heritage Village, \$1,250, for the exhibit "Connecting the County."

Douglas County: Runestone Museum Foundation, \$4,000, for a museum security system.

Faribault County: Winnebago Area Museum, \$3,180, toward installation of a museum security system.

Freeborn County: Freeborn County Historical Society, \$314, for area newspapers on microfilm.

Grant County: Grant County Historical Society, \$2,797, toward installation of a museum security system.

Hennepin County: Aeon, \$7,000, for interpretive signage at Ripley Gardens, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Hennepin County: American Swedish Institute, \$1,200, for the exhibit "80 Years Young: The American Swedish Institute."

Hennepin County: Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest, \$4,000, for an archives shelving and storage replacement project.

Itasca County: Itasca County Historical Society, \$2,500, for the Grand Rapids Herald Review photo negative collection project.

Lake County: Lake County Historical Society, \$6,000, to restore the Mallet Locomotive.

Lake County: Bay Area Historical Society, \$7,000, for an exhibit titled "The Story of Reserve Mining."

Lake of the Woods County: Depot Preservation Alliance, \$8,000, to restore the Canadian National Railways Depot, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Lake of the Woods County: Lake of the Woods County Historical Society, \$4,000, for a collections inventory project.

McLeod County: McLeod County Historical Society, \$1,000, to preserve studio photos and negatives.

Meeker County: Greater Litchfield Opera House Association, Inc., \$8,000, to restore the Litchfield Opera House, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Nobles County: Historic Worthington, \$7,000, for a Historic Dayton House interpretive program.

Nobles County: Nobles County Historical Society, \$1,715, for the next phase of its museum collections inventory.

Otter Tail County: Friends of the History Museum of East Otter Tail County, \$3,319, for a technology project, "Digitization through MyTownHistory.org."

Greater Litchfield Opera House Assn.



The Renaissance Revival-style Litchfield Opera House in Meeker County, completed in 1900, will be restored with the help of a state grant-in-aid.



Eastman Johnson's oil painting "Ojibwe Women" was cleaned and restored with a state grant-in-aid to the St. Louis County Historical Society. Five more Johnson paintings will receive similar treatment with the society's latest grant.

Pipestone County: Pipestone County Historical Society, \$8,000, to restore entrances to the Pipestone City Hall, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ramsey County: Historic Saint Paul, \$2,500, for an interpretive project, "Tour Saint Paul: Dayton's Bluff."

Renville County: Renville County Historical Society, \$1,000, toward Phase V of a microfilm copies project.

Rock County: Rock County Historical Society, \$1,500, for a collections inventory project.

Roseau County: Roseau County Historical Society, \$1,000, to improve interpretation through the use of technology in exhibits.

St. Louis County: St. Louis County Historical Society, \$2,500, for conservation and photo documentation of the Eastman Johnson art collection.

Scott County: Scott County Historical Society, \$2,500, for an oral history digitization project.

Stearns County: Melrose Area Historical Society, \$2,000, for transcription and storage of the Edwin Clark letters.

Stearns County: Stearns History Museum, \$1,000, to purchase collections storage boxes and supplies.

Steele County: Minnesota State School Orphanage Museum, \$1,100, for a photo archive project.

Traverse County: Wheaton Community Library, \$2,500, for the Wheaton Community Newspaper Digitization project.

Wabasha County: Wabasha County Historical Society, \$8,000, to replace the front steps on Reads Landing School, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Watsonwan County: St. James Opera House Restoration Project, \$8,000, to restore the St. James Opera House, determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Winona County: Winona County Historical Society, \$8,000, toward a fire suppression system in the former Winona Armory, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Wright County: Cokato Historical Society, \$1,950, to restore the Akerlund Photographic Studio, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. ■

State funding – continued from page 1

funds from a sales tax increase, to be divided among projects benefitting the outdoors, clean water, parks and trails, and arts and cultural heritage. A total of 19.75% of the additional sales tax revenue will be dedicated to an arts and cultural heritage fund, with a portion of that amount designated for history-related projects around the state (see page 8).

For the latest information on these budget matters and plans for the Legacy Amendment monies, go to www.mnhs.org/historymatters or see the Local History News e-newsletter at www.mnhs.org/newsletters/localhistory. ■

New grants program launched

Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund provides the monies

From a pool of money created by the Legacy Amendment passed by voters last fall, the Minnesota Legislature in May designated \$22 million of the new Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund to be used for history projects. That includes \$6.75 million for statewide historic and cultural grants to be awarded during the 2010-11 biennium. An additional \$4 million was appropriated for collaborations between history organizations and other partners. Expectations are high for what these funds can accomplish across Minnesota – projects of enduring value for the cause of history and historic preservation.

The language in the bill establishing the grants program specifies that the funding is for “history programs and projects operated or conducted by or through local, county, regional or other historical or cultural organizations; or for activities to preserve significant historic and cultural resources.”

Responsibility for administering this new competitive grants program lies with the Minnesota Historical Society. As the historic resources advisory committee required by the legislation is appointed and program guidelines are developed, the Society will hold meetings around the state to gather

input. A series of informational workshops to introduce the new grants program will follow. Program materials are expected to be available in late summer.

It is not too early to begin thinking about projects for which your organization may wish to apply for grant assistance. The MHS Grants Office welcomes your ideas and questions. Check the MHS web site at www.mnhs.org/shpo/grants or the Local History News e-newsletter at www.mnhs.org/newsletters/localhistory for the latest information. ■

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