

Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

Agenda Item Memo

DATE June 6, 2012

SUBJECT: Travel by Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council members

Background

Over the last four years, the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council members have, either as a group or individually, traveled throughout Minnesota to visit field sites and programs funded by the Outdoor Heritage Fund and to participate in conferences, workshops, and meetings. The council includes in its operating procedures steps for authorizing individual travel and providing for per diem and reimbursement for travel on behalf of the council. The operating procedures do not describe the circumstances when individual council travel is warranted. This paper addresses three alternatives for council travel, suggests guidelines for council member travel alternatives, and recommended changes to LSOHC Operating Procedures.

Suggested Motion

“Motion to adopt the changes to the LSOHC Operating Procedures, Section II.5 as presented .”

Suggested Procedure

Once motion is before the Council, it is up for discussion, amendments and final passage.

Travel by Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council (LSOHC) Members

Executive Summary

The objective of Outdoor Heritage Fund financed travel is to increase Council understanding of funded program benefits and to increase member understanding of current habitat related issues. Over the last four years, the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council members, either as a group or individually, traveled Minnesota to visit field sites and programs funded by the Outdoor Heritage Fund and to participate in conferences, workshops, and meetings. Member attendance to the field portion of these group trips has been sparse. The Council seeks to improve member attendance and understanding of funded programs and related issues.

The Council includes in its operating procedures steps for authorizing individual travel and providing for per diem and reimbursement for travel on behalf of the council. The operating procedures do not describe the circumstances when individual council travel is warranted. This paper addresses alternatives for council travel.

Issue

There has been discussion amongst members of the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council regarding travel to Outdoor Heritage Fund - supported program sites and other conservation project sites and meetings. Per LSOHC Operating Procedures, the chair and the legislative member of the executive board review Council member's travel requests and reimbursement expenses for lodging, mileage, and meals and payment of per diem on a case-by-case basis. (See extracted travel section on page 6) The Council chair has requested a fuller discussion on Council travel policy, with the objective of improving Council-wide knowledge of issues and benefits of funded programs. This paper outlines the issue and lays out alternatives for LSOHC member travel.

The Council has neither written policy nor guidelines on the kinds of activities or events that merit publically funded travel. However, the LSOHC operating procedures do describe how

members request authorization for reimbursed travel outside of scheduled council meetings. These procedures provide data on the cost and potential benefit of requested travel. The procedures also place in the hands of the chair and the legislative member of the Executive Committee the decision on whether or not travel is in the Council's interest and thus the public interest. The chair or the chair's designee is assigned the task to authorize or approve member travel in consultation with the legislative member. The legislative member approves per diem payments and or travel expense reimbursements. This approval by a member of the legislature is required under legislative procedures as well. Also, the chair of the Legislative Coordinating Commission reviews all Council invoices, including travel expense reimbursement requests.

The requesting LSOHC member must complete the approval process at least 30 days prior to the travel date, describing the date, location, time, purpose, and benefit to the council and the public. (See attached travel request form on page 7) The member must also submit a written description of the learning experience to be shared with other members when requesting travel reimbursement. Travel out of the state must be in concurrence with Legislative Coordinating Commission (LCC) policy, which at this time, does not allow for travel outside of Minnesota. Travel out of the state must be specifically approved by the LCC and all Council invoices including travel reimbursement are reviewed by the LCC chair.

Suggested travel guidelines below provide opportunities for members to represent the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council and the Outdoor Heritage Fund in a variety of venues that support the mission of the fund, provide for professional growth, and further public information objectives.

Suggested Guidelines for Travel

LSOHC member travel should be for a member or members to:

- Make a presentation on behalf of the OHF and LSOHC at an event at the request of an agency or organization.

- Attend a meeting, conference, or workshop at which topics are discussed related to prairies, wetlands, forests or other fish, game or wildlife habitat conservation, or the related environment.
- Attend an event that marks the acquisition, restoration, and/or enhancement of prairies, wetlands, forests or other fish, game or wildlife habitat funded through an OHF appropriation.

During the term of Chair Kilgore the Council agreed it would not accept invitations to visit prospective projects. Firsthand project observation may tilt the scales in favor of visited projects and bias a member for or against a particular program or project. Therefore, it's not advisable for individual members to travel to view sites or attend program presentations if the site or program might be included in a future proposal.

Member Travel Alternatives

Below are three possible travel alternative for Council members – travel individually, travel with staff direction, or full council travel. The alternatives are presented below. A hybrid model is possible.

- Individual Member Elected Travel

Members travel on their own throughout the state to sites protected, restored, and/or enhanced with Outdoor Heritage Funds. Benefits include informing the full council on initiatives; building relationships with project managers and organizations/agencies; and increasing the member's knowledge base. Council members are responsible for sharing written information with the Council as a whole and therefore shared with the public.

A variation on this approach is to assign each member a geographic area near their residence in which travel would be authorized for the purposes of learning more about issues and benefits related to funded programs. Each member would have a travel budget and territory, however legislative rules would still require authorization by a legislative member to incur travel expenses on a trip basis. This would enhance the development of regional expertise. It also has the

potential to better develop regional contact points for the public. Questions raised by this model arise with the member appointment process. Members are not appointed on a regional basis. Members are appointed statewide.

Biennial budgeting for Council travel could be impacted by widespread individual member travel, and could potentially yield inequity amongst members if a first come, first serve policy is instituted. It also might require additional staff to serve member travel needs.

- Individual or Small Group Travel with Staff Direction

An alternative to individual travel by members is for staff to develop an optional travel schedule to programs or projects and invite members. Staff-developed individual or small group travel would be more closely monitored for equity amongst programs and across ecological regions and could be linked to the biannual status reports. Staff would control member travel to avoid quorum violations of the Open Meeting Law. A staff-designed schedule of visits provides for more accurate budgeting and staff would report findings to the Council under this alternative. The integrity of the open meeting law and the careful attendance of quorum would need to be monitored under this alternative. A staff-designed schedule for a quorum of Council members for travel would allow sufficient public notice.

Members would be free to suggest venues that could be relevant for Council travel. Staff would receive invitations to events, conferences and projects from organizers and council members. Staff would then determine if the opportunity is appropriate and if so which member(s) should be invited to participate keeping in mind that the opportunities should be spread among Council members. Nothing in this model would prevent members from volunteering for certain events of project visits but in some circumstances, voluntary travel would be undertaken at the individual member's expense. Staff would then seek approval from the chair and legislative member of the Executive Committee.

- Council Travel as a Whole

In the past, Council members travelled together to hold Council meetings in greater Minnesota as well as visit project sites and other areas of interest. Potential conflicts with the open meeting law have been resolved in statute (97A.056, Subd. 5) and Council members have been instructed

to not discuss nor decide agenda items outside of a formal Council hearing, with the exception of receiving information while traveling in a vehicle. The Council trips can be budgeted for in the biennial budget process. This alternative allows all Council members to participate and provides an even playing field in terms of budget and information sharing. This alternative also allows for required public notice.

These alternatives are not mutually exclusive.

Extracted from “Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council Operating Procedures”

The chair or the chair’s designee authorizes travel:

1. Authorizes travel, outside of travel for regular Council or committee business meetings, for Council members in response to a written request from a Council member that specifically states the date, location, time, purpose, benefit to the Council and State of Minnesota and estimated expense of the travel. This member travel request will be submitted to Council staff for review with the Chair.
2. Council staff, per the authorization from the Chair and consultation with the Legislative member of the Executive Committee authorized to sign reimbursement forms, will approve or deny the travel request in writing.
3. All travel requests, outside of regular council business, must complete the authorization process 30 days prior to travel date. The member traveling will submit a written summary of the learning experience to be shared with council members and submit it with their expense reimbursement form.
4. Out-of-State travel requires the concurrence of LCC policies.
5. Expense vouchers to be submitted after authorized travel, pursuant to guidelines established by the council, on the following basis:
 - i. For public members, per the expense policy of the Commissioner’s Plan, Chapter 15 (Exhibit 3)
 - ii. Public members are authorized to collect per diem spent on authorized council activities, as provided in Minnesota Statutes 15.075, subd. 3.
 - iii. For COUNCIL staff, consistent with Commissioner’s Plan.

Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

Council Member Travel Request Form

Today's Date: _____

Name of Member: _____

Date(s) of Travel: _____

Traveling to: _____ from _____

Purpose of the Travel (attach a brochure or agenda if applicable):

How will your attendance at this event benefit the Council and the State of Minnesota:

Estimated of Travel Cost:

Cost of the Registration Fee, if applicable: \$ _____

Is overnight lodging required? YES NO

If yes, How many nights _____ and approximate cost _____ per night.

Anticipated meal reimbursement: _____ # of breakfast _____ # of lunch _____ # of diner

Estimated Round Trip Mileage: _____

Staff Notes:

Approved (date: _____) Denied (date: _____)

LSOHC Chair Signature: _____

LSOHC Legislative Member Signature: _____

** By approval and acceptance of this travel, you agree to submit a summary of this learning experience to be shared with council members and be on file in the LSOHC Office. This summary shall be submitted in writing with your expense reimbursement form.