

## PROJECT NARRATIVE

### 1. Statement of Need

#### A. Background

Since 1994, the Prairie Ecology Bus Center's (PEBC) "*Prairie Schooler*" Ecology Bus has logged over 130,000 miles, delivering environmental education programs to residents throughout rural western Minnesota and Iowa. Unlike traditional nature centers, this museum-on-wheels is a state-of-the-art school, mobile scientific laboratory, and classroom designed to educate school children and adults about environmental and natural sciences. The "*Prairie Schooler*" Ecology Bus is the only one of its kind in North America. Seating up to 32 students, it takes them to outdoor learning sites in their own communities, providing all the tools they need to conduct scientific investigations including sweep nets, water dip nets, rubber boots, binoculars, chemical test kits, soil corers, microscopes, a macroscope, snowshoes, a VCR, three onboard video monitors, a laptop computer, and other equipment. It runs on alternative soy diesel fuel and is handicapped-accessible to accommodate special needs learners. The PEBC provides nature education to thousands of youth, families and adults each year. Starting with a core service area of 12 rural counties, programs are now delivered to more than 20 counties throughout southern and western Minnesota and northern Iowa.

Home base for the Ecology Bus is a small donated 1940s farmhouse, located within a county park in the southwestern Minnesota town of Lakefield. This 950 square foot structure houses the administrative operations of PEBC: office space for three full-time staff, classroom space for small groups of 6-10 people (doubling as display space for natural science collections) and storage for program supplies.

#### B. Regional Significance and Local Need

*Southwest Minnesota has no other nature center* to call its own other than the Prairie Ecology Bus Center. There are many nature centers throughout Minnesota, but they are concentrated within or near to the Minneapolis/St. Paul metro area, SE Minnesota or NE Minnesota. For people interested in learning about our natural environment and natural heritage, options are extremely limited. The Ecology Bus, while a very effective mobile tool, can only reach limited audiences. Given its mobile nature, it may be in one community one day and 150 miles in another direction the following day. PEBC's permanent site is too small to meet the region's needs. There are no other nature center facilities in southwest Minnesota within a 125 mile radius that are open year-round for people to visit and learn about the natural world through exhibits and educational opportunities.

Not surprisingly, rural southwest Minnesota is greatly underserved in providing nature education. There is a common, pervasive misconception that by virtue of living in a rural region, residents know about the natural landscapes and how nature "works." The reality is quite to the contrary. PEBC staff witness just how disconnected our youth are from the natural world on a daily basis. The young people in our region are just as "plugged in" to electronic gadgets as the metropolitan urban and suburban youth. We are now seeing a generation of youth who have no tangible connection to the land and to the agriculture that is the mainstay of our region. We often find that the parents of today's youth are also unaware and lack basic knowledge of local ecosystems and their importance their own and their family's well-being. Now, more than ever, this region needs a place for community members of all ages to develop an understanding and appreciation for our natural resources.

The PEBC has been asked numerous times to provide regular, on-site home school nature-focused classes on the sciences and the arts for area families, teacher training workshops, adult seminar series on a wide range of nature/environment topics, broadened public programs, expanded non-formal programs (to Scouts, 4-H groups, Mentoring groups, etc.), more options for school groups and other requests. Without adequate facilities, and subsequent volunteer support and staffing, the PEBC has largely been unable to provide the requested services.

Using other facilities in area communities is not cost effective or time efficient. Many programs are not feasible without access to natural areas outside our doors. The rapid deterioration of our farmhouse and the inevitable replacement of the original Ecology Bus has catapulted us into creating a master plan that satisfies future needs. The master plan not only includes a permanent programming facility but also provides the “anchor” we need to develop a larger base of support for our outreach programs via the Ecology Bus. This activity is identified in the second phase of the current PEBC strategic plan.

### C. Organizational Need

The PEBC is poised for significant growth in the near future, but before we proceed fully with plans to both replace the Ecology Bus and build a permanent nature center, we need to (1) create a master plan to guide and inform the growth of the PEBC; (2) train the PEBC Board of Directors and staff to facilitate the transition from a “start-up” organization with an organizing board to a “growth” organization with a governing board; and (3) hire an administrative assistant who can help with the project. The Prairie Ecology Bus Center is preparing to grow into its shoes so it can walk forward.

The Ecology Bus has served the organization well and the PEBC is actively pursuing its replacement while it is still in good working condition. The Ecology Bus is an amazing tool that allows us to bring a nature center to participants throughout our rural region and allow us the ability to take participants to their own natural areas to learn about and begin to develop a relationship with nature. While knowing we would someday need to have better facilities from which to operate, the success of the Ecology Bus has relegated thoughts of a new nature center to the back burner while energy was devoted to the expansion of the Ecology Bus program. While successful in its programs, the “on the road” model of a nature center is a barrier to building relationships with community. An anchoring facility is needed to build the necessary community support for an organization to facilitate its growth and development.

With tremendous opportunity for growth at our feet, the PEBC now finds itself in the position of needing to pursue the more traditional model of nature centers and focus on the building of a permanent site suitable for multiple uses—larger classrooms, an exhibit hall for collections and interactive exhibits, sufficient office space for current and future staff and volunteers and adequate storage space for program equipment and natural science collections.

As the organization has grown, so has its board. The current Board of Directors is 16 members strong. The PEBC facility cannot accommodate 16 people in one room to hold a meeting. As such, board meetings take place in a facility 18 miles away from the PEBC. This is neither efficient nor conducive for Board to develop a personal relationship with the organization and understanding of the facility constraints that we work under on a daily basis.

### D. Building Institutional Capacity

PEBC’s project fulfills the MFA’s Building Institutional Capacity goal. Before any new growth can happen, PEBC needs to have an operational master plan in place to guide the new center’s development, sustainability and growth, as well as that of the new Ecology Bus to complement the new facility’s activities. To supplement this operational plan, the staff and Board of Directors need developmental training to help them help the PEBC through this major growth transition. Training to give Board and staff the skills to lead this organization to new levels, determine policy and funding strategies, will serve to greatly enhance the PEBC’s ability to be a leader in environmental and nature education throughout the region. The resulting operational “master” plan will provide the PEBC the essential framework from which to make decisions on its operations and how to best serve its local and regional community.

**E. PEBC Mission and Strategic Plan**

*The PEBC is a vehicle for understanding and appreciating the natural wonders in our own backyards.* This mission pertains not only to programming with the Ecology Bus, the actual vehicle, but also refers to PEBC’s other means of nature education both on site at PEBC’s nature center facility or via other types of outreach programs.

It is PEBC’s core mission to teach others about nature with the hopes of inspiring students of all ages to want to learn more about the world that supports them. Through learning comes understanding of our relationship to the natural world and ultimately, a sense of responsibility and stewardship for protecting our resources for future generations. PEBC’s plans to replace the Ecology Bus and continue our outreach educational efforts via this mobile nature center fit with our mission. PEBC’s plan to build a new nature center, thereby expanding our capacity to serve the southwest region of Minnesota, is also in keeping with our mission.

PEBC’s strategic plan is structured in three phases:

- *Growing by Focusing* for years 2005-2007 - Phase 1 (P1)
- *Growing by Expanding* for years 2008-2010 - Phase 2 (P2)
- *Growing by Replicating* for years 2011 and beyond - Phase 3 (P3)

The proposed project meets four of the nine priorities identified by participating stakeholders and specified in the strategic plan. These priorities and the project’s supporting activities are listed below:

Project Components	Strategic Plan Priorities and Activities
<p>Create a master plan for the growth and directions of the PEBC and Ecology Bus</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concentrate efforts within original 12-county service area plus adjacent urban centers in order to effectively increase participation from formal and non-formal youth groups; align programs with schools’ and groups’ needs; target marketing activities; run Bus at capacity (P1)</li> <li>• Stabilize and diversify PEBC funding sources by growing sources of capital and operating revenue with capital needed for replacement Bus and enhanced center space (P1)</li> <li>• Expand efforts to broader service area and new types of users (P2)</li> <li>• Continue to diversify PEBC revenue and discontinue charitable gambling as a resource by 2010 (P2)</li> <li>• Identify long-term building and grounds needs (P2)</li> <li>• Add staff (P2)</li> <li>• Replicate the PEBC model beyond PEBC’s current service area (P3)</li> </ul>
<p>Staff and Board Development in organizational lifecycle growth and capacity building</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concentrate efforts within original 12-county service area plus adjacent urban centers in order to effectively increase participation from formal and non-formal youth groups; align programs with schools’ and groups’ needs; target marketing activities; run Bus at capacity (P1)</li> <li>• Stabilize and diversify PEBC funding sources – grow sources of capital and operating revenue with capital needed for replacement Bus and enhanced center space (P1)</li> <li>• Expand efforts to broader service area and new types of users (P2)</li> <li>• Continue to diversify PEBC revenue and discontinue charitable gambling as a resource by 2010 (P2)</li> </ul>

The proposed project will be a commitment and an investment of Board and staff resources to the long-term success of the PEBC and its ability to serve the southwest region of Minnesota. Through the project, the PEBC will develop the knowledge, skills and organizational direction to lead the region in environmental and nature education. The project will provide the opportunity to hone an organizational philosophy that will guide PEBC's growth. Over the course of 17 years, the PEBC incorporated as a non-profit corporation, secured funds and built its first Ecology Bus, developed and delivered programs with the guiding principal being the mission statement. During this time, feedback on programs from educators and participants, requests for new programs and ongoing suggestions encouraged from volunteers and general community members and stakeholders were collected and considered. The PEBC Board of Directors and executive staff participated in strategic planning sessions culminating in a board retreat in February, 2005. The result of the retreat was PEBC's first official strategic plan which has informed PEBC's direction and guided decisions made during the current "Growing by Focusing" stage.

In order to tackle the second phase of PEBC's strategic plan, there is an undeniable need to bring in expert guidance to assist the Board and staff in developing the skills to move the organization to a greater level of service to its constituents. Professional expertise will help the PEBC explore its options in detail and create a solid operational plan so that when the doors of the new nature center open, the PEBC is already on the ground and running with a well-planned roadmap of direction and action plan for who will do what and how. This project contributes to institutional capacity by creating a supporting framework and systems heretofore unavailable to the PEBC.

#### F. Geography and Demographics

The ultimate beneficiaries of this project and process will be the program recipients ranging in ages from pre-school learners to senior citizens. The PEBC serves both rural and urban audiences in the region. At its base, the PEBC operates out of a 40-acre park located on the north edge of the community of Lakefield, Jackson County, Minnesota. Jackson county has a population of 11,283 (Census 2000) which is comprised of primarily white residents. Census data from year 2000 indicate that Jackson county has a population that is 1.4% Asian, 1.9% Hispanic, 1.6% other races combined. Neighboring counties have similar or higher percentages of non-Caucasian residents. Recent statistics of Jackson county school districts indicate an average of 31% of students qualify for the free or reduced fee lunch program. While this information pertains to the county where the PEBC has its facility, the PEBC pulls participants to its nature center from neighboring counties, some traveling nearly 100 miles for a program.

Southern and western Minnesota draws a fairly large migrant population to its region because of its agricultural activity. We often see groups of learners with multiple race backgrounds, especially in those communities where there is also factory work available. Meetings with organizers of migrant community education and outreach programs and research have shown that economically challenged families and immigrants have a tendency to recreate close to home. One of the anticipated outcomes of the new nature center is to establish programming where new residents to this area can become familiar with the landscape and natural heritage of their new home and become more comfortable in exploring our region and the outdoor opportunities it has to offer. Such programming would incorporate volunteers with the ability to communicate with the second language learner participants. The development of such a program would fall under the category of program planning as part of the master plan activities.

## **2. Project Design**

The proposed project is the creation of a master plan for the growth and direction of the PEBC and Ecology Bus. To support this activity, training the staff and board in organizational lifecycle growth, development and capacity building is key.

## A. Goals and Objectives

### **Goal 1: Lead southwest Minnesota in providing innovative environmental education experiences.**

*Objective A: Align programs with needs of formal (school groups), non-formal (organized youth groups, adults groups) and casual (drop-in visitors) constituencies.*

- Develop focus groups to assist in identifying programs and program emphasis needed to meet target audience needs.
- Look at potential future program partners and audiences with eye to new program developments.

### **Goal 2: Transition from a start-up organization with an organizing board to a growth organization with a governing board.**

*Objective A: Provide board and staff development training in governance and organizational lifecycle development.*

- Hire a temporary, two-year administrative assistant to assume many day-to-day activities and free the executive directors time to devote to project development

### **Goal 3: Plan for development of a new nature center facility and new Ecology Bus**

*Objective A: Create an operational master plan to inform and guide decisions*

- Hire professional museum planning firm, through bid process, to work with PEBC in development of master plan.

*Objective B: Evaluate PEBC's identity and mission.*

- Examine how current name and mission may need to be adjusted with new emphasis on regional nature center and its activities.

## B. Project Management

The project manager will be PEBC's Executive Director, Chrystal Dunker. The museum planning firm will be hired through a competitive bid process to lead the organization in the creation of the master plan. Ideally, this will be a firm with experience working with nature centers and other environmental education facilities. The executive director will direct the work of the firm throughout the process. Therefore, an administrative assistant will be hired to assume some of the day-to-day operations of the PEBC such as coordinating and scheduling school programs, public and community education programs, press releases, membership management, newsletter development, and event planning. PEBC's lead naturalist will have a shift in duties and assume a portion of the executive director's activities mentioned above.

At regular intervals throughout the project, benchmarks established for the project will be evaluated to ascertain progress and effectiveness. Assessment from Board of Directors, in concert with the project manager, will determine if corrective actions need to be made to keep the project on schedule and on course. As part of analyzing the market, marketing strategy, programming strategies, revenue/expense projections, etc., community stakeholders will be invited to participate in the planning of PEBC's strategies.

## **3. Project Resources**

The project is expected to begin late summer, 2008. It will begin with a search for an administrative assistant. Once hired, he or she will be trained to take over some of the day-to-day operations normally carried out by the

executive director. This will free a portion of the director's time to be reallocated to the project. Purchase of office equipment to support project activities will be procured in winter, 2008. The project will have three distinct phases: 1) project development; 2) preliminary draft of master plan; 3) final master plan.

Project development will consist of the following activities:

- Development training with PEBC board and staff to understand non-profit lifecycle development and how we work within the stage we're in and how we transition to the next "growth" stage to accomplish the proposed project (winter, 2008)
- Project framing including parameters and approach (five months)
- Executive director and one board member attendance at the 2008 Association for Nature Center Administrators Summit for additional project support training and development (fall, 2008)
- Develop a request for proposal (RFP) will be developed for the project and distributed to targeted museum planning firms for a competitive bid process (4-5 months).

Once a museum planning firm has been hired and contract signed, work on the master plan will begin in earnest.

Preliminary drafting of the master plan will be done primarily by the hired firm in conjunction with input by the executive director and board of directors (5-6 months). The plan will be submitted back to the board for review and comment. Input will also be solicited from area stakeholders.

The final master plan will be adjusted according to feedback, designed and printed (5-6 months). Staff and board reviews project at the end of each phase and approves all activity before proceeding to the next phase. The total cost of the project is \$355,563.50 (IMLS \$149,850.00, Applicant: \$205,713.50).

Matching funds from the applicant will be in-kind costs associated with executive director salary and one half cost share of the naturalist time to assist with the project, fringe benefits, indirect costs and costs associated with travel to the ANCA conference. PEBC board of directors will be providing in-kind donations of their time. Between the 16 members, an expected 2000 hours time over the two year process will be devoted to this project at a value of \$120,000.00.

Chrystal Dunker is currently the executive director of the PEBC and responsible for the overall direction and management of the center. She will serve as the project director. She has been executive director for nine years and has guided the PEBC from its previous service area reach of 12 counties to now have programs serving up to 25 counties and increasing participation in programs from 5,000 participants to over 10,000 participants each year. She has an A.A.S. degree in Hotel and Resort Management from the University of Minnesota, a B.S. degree in Wildlife Biology and Management from the University of Idaho and a M.S. degree in Natural Resources Information and Education from the University of Idaho. Prior to working for the PEBC, she contracted with the North Dakota State Water Commission to conduct teacher training workshops throughout the state. As project manager, Chrystal will be responsible for administering the grant, overseeing the project budget and working with the museum planning firm. Chrystal will devote 50% of her time (in-kind) to the project. To take advantage of Chrystal's history and knowledge of the project and PEBC program, the PEBC will re-distribute some of her operational responsibilities to current and future staff.

Mike Dunker has worked with the PEBC for four years and is the lead naturalist for the PEBC. He will assume some of the program coordination duties normally overseen by Chrystal. This will account for approximately 25% of his time, cost-shared with IMLS (\$6,240 IMLS, \$8112 PEBC in-kind). Included in this time allocation

will be time spent working with Chrystal and the Board on the project. Some of Mike's activities working on the newsletter, website updates, program materials development will be shifted to a new administrative assistant position to account for the 25% time working on the project. Chrystal currently works the equivalent of 1.6 FTE.

To free additional time to devote to the project, a temporary, two year, .75 FTE administrative assistant will be hired to do many of the day-to-day operations activities and tasks associated with the project where needed. This position requires proven office management, written and oral skills, database and organizational skills and volunteer coordination experience as outlined in the attached PDF position description. (IMLS \$40,560, PEBC \$6084). PEBC naturalist staff are highly skilled in PEBC programming and will continue to provide a key part in maintaining PEBC programs through the project.

#### **4. Impact**

The resulting master plan document will be an invaluable resource for PEBC to utilize in securing funds to build and develop the new nature center and strengthen the Ecology Bus mobile nature center. With a well-thought out plan to guide PEBC's growth, potential funders will be able to envision how their donations will strategically enhance this vital community resource. The master plan shows the funders that in-depth planning has been given to all aspects of the nature center – the present operations, as well as, the planned and measured growth expected for the future and benefits this resource presents to the community and region as a whole.

In addition to the document providing sound business planning for potential financial sources, it will be an effective tool that will help current and future board of director members see and understand what the PEBC is about and make critical connections between their activities and the growth of the organization. That same aspect will hold true for current and future staff, volunteers, community partners and stakeholders. Simply put, having a master plan is good business. It will help the PEBC focus its activities and resources so that it can best serve the youth, families and adults through out our region.

# BUDGET FORM - PAGE FOUR

## Section B: Summary Budget

	\$ IMLS	\$ Cost Share	\$ TOTAL COSTS
1. Salaries and Wages	46,800.00	47,840.00	94,640.00
2. Fringe Benefits	0.00	14,196.00	14,196.00
3. Consultant Fees	81,500.00	120,000.00	201,500.00
4. Travel	1,400.00	1,200.00	2,600.00
5. Supplies and Materials	20,150.00	0.00	20,150.00
6. Services	0.00	0.00	0.00
7. Student Support	0.00	0.00	0.00
8. Other Costs	0.00	0.00	0.00
<b>TOTAL DIRECT COSTS (1-8)</b>	<b>149,850.00</b>	<b>183,236.00</b>	<b>333,086.00</b>
9. Indirect Costs	0.00	22,477.50	22,477.50
<b>TOTAL COSTS (Direct and Indirect)</b>	<b>149,850.00</b>	<b>205,713.50</b>	<b>355,563.50</b>

## Project Funding for the Entire Grant Period

1. Grant Funds Requested from IMLS	149,850.00
2. Cost Sharing:	
a. Cash Contribution	0.00
b. In-Kind Contribution	205,713.50
c. Other Federal Agencies*	0.00
d. TOTAL COST SHARING	205,713.50
3. TOTAL PROJECT FUNDING (1+2d)	355,563.50
% of Total Costs Requested from IMLS	42.00%

\* If funding has been requested from another federal agency, indicate the agency's name:

