

Designing, Locating and Building a Shooting Education Center

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For me, attending this symposium and talking to you is a celebration. In 1993, several of us from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources attended the second National Shooting Range Symposium in Salt Lake City. We were working on a project that was just a figment of our imagination at that time. We went to gather information about designing a user-friendly range.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) Shooting Education Center was designed and is managed by citizen groups. Federal Cartridge Company spearheaded a governor-appointed task force. Bill Stevens from Federal met with a group of 24 citizens representing all avenues of shooting, including trap, skeet, international, silhouette shooters and law enforcement. My role was the DNR representative, trying to keep a liaison interest.

We literally met for years to reach agreement on what kind of range to present, what it was going to look like, whether it was going to be indoor or outdoor, and whether it was going to meet law enforcement and other needs.

We sought legislation and specific bonding monies to be able to build the project. We were successful. Again, this resulted from years of work and knocking on hundreds of doors. Four of us lobbied for funding, primarily Federal Cartridge, Minnesota Deer Hunters Association, National Rifle Association (NRA) and DNR. We met with virtually all legislators interested in any form of outdoor venues. We received \$2.5 million.

After securing the money, we didn't know exactly what to do with it. Was this going to become a high-focus area? Did we want law enforcement involved? We found out that a full-service shooting center was cost prohibitive. Two and a half million dollars doesn't go very far. When I say "we," that means all of the shooting interests coming together. It involved a lot of giving on the part of shooters from Minnesota.

The final choice was to build for two specific purposes. First was to recruit new shooters and give them shooting experience. Second was to encourage the highest level of competitive shooters. We wanted to design something that would not look like the traditional gun range. We wanted our innovative design to entice and recruit new shooters.

We went through a formal pre-design process, involving all the shooting interest groups. A facilitator asked everybody what they wanted. The committee met, reviewed and reacted to everything that the designers had brought in. We revised this process, and it repeated several times.

John Guenther is a career professional with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and currently serves as Regional Director for northeastern Minnesota. He served on various task forces, committees and boards which were formed to shape the project that became the Minnesota Shooting Sports Education Center. Mr. Guenther was part of the leadership team in every phase of the Center's development, and it has received wide praise for its design and utility since its opening in June 1999.

When we completed revisions, we took the design to an architect. We went through a series of meetings with architects over several years, talking about nuts and bolts of range design. What kind of bullet trap system? What kind of air flow system? One of the smart things that we did was find an architect who could do all the real technical work. We had professionals who were lighting engineers, air flow engineers and experts. It prevented us from having to become experts.

We then went into the construction phase. It was a state bidding process, and that's always complex. We experienced community resistance, reflecting their fears about noise, despite this being an indoor range. The Shooting Education Center is located in a resort area. People around the lakes were concerned about the impact on wildlife and traffic flow. A number of them were seriously concerned about school buses coming to the range.

Location became a very important issue for us. Our first site was an abandoned ski hill. Part of our vision was to have lodging on-site for our shooting athletes in training and a location where we could send them to a shooting camp similar to a hockey or wrestling camp. The location proved too expensive, so the community helped us find a new neighborhood. We found one adjacent to an existing gun range. We got business community support for bringing shooting range businesses and new shooters into town. We received a one-time grant from a local foundation that allowed us start-up money for the first three years.

We handled anti-gun propaganda through open communications about our role in teaching gun safety and the safe handling of guns. We promote the NRA's Eddy Eagle program. We're engaged in starting up a gun lock program where we will distribute locks statewide. We handled complaints or concerns from the pro-gun community—what kind of competition would we be for the private sector, what about the neighboring and adjacent ranges? The answer was to form partnerships with all of them.

Then we started building. We used the NRA manual for range specifications so we didn't have to reinvent the wheel, and construction was professionally managed by an architectural firm.

The DNR monitored the project in three separate ways, because we are the building owners, and we wanted to understand long-term 20- and 40-year prospects for the building. We used a board of directors to watch everything. A representative was on-site almost every day during the construction period, and the architect's representative was there also. Again, that kept us from having to be the professionals.

After a year of operation, we still have more questions to answer. We currently are working on projects to expand our hours; it's difficult with minimal staff. The staff works for the board of directors, not the DNR. DNR is only the landowner.

The board is constantly looking for funding, and works with and trains volunteers. They want to offer free shooting to all youth and recruit youth by the busload for safety and skill training. The board hired someone recently to work on grant writing and private donations.

We hire new staff as money becomes available, each of them with specific purposes. Our next one will be a volunteer coordinator. After that, we'll hire a program coordinator to develop new training programs. We're becoming expert at finding different ways of making accommodations.

Even the improbable is possible. This project probably died nine times before it was finished. It's easy to look down our noses at anything designed by committee, but committee support can be very beneficial. No one person could take credit for our final design, and we've had no complaints. We've had all levels of shooters, from the silver medalist and coach of the U.S. Olympic rifle team to brand new shooters. We host competitions and tournaments, and we have no complaints. Well, we had somebody say that we didn't have enough coat hangers

A good committee is absolutely unstoppable. We've gone through several developments of committees. Every time that we got in trouble, we sought a broader base. Look to the community. Look to more shooters. Look to more interests. Bring them in and talk to them about what's going on and where the troubles are. You simply shouldn't let a good idea die for lack of commitment. We followed through on this because it was too good to let die.