

Why is it important to respond to a GPRA-related request for historic preservation accomplishments?

The Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) sends a strong, clear message to all of us who administer Federal programs. Those programs can no longer be judged by what we do, but rather by what we accomplish; not by the level of our effort, but by the ultimate outcome of that effort. Where a Federal program is carried out through the grant-making process, as is the case with the Historic Preservation Fund, GPRA's inquiry follows those dollars to their ultimate use. The programmatic outcome is the key.

Beginning in FY 1998, the National Park Service and the other Executive branch agencies present their appropriation requests in a format that: 1) projects the outcomes to be achieved through the expenditure of those dollars and 2) reports on the outcomes achieved through previous expenditures. Further, we must establish a useful baseline, against which those outcomes can be measured, so that there is some sense of whether the program is making reasonable progress toward its longer-range goals and objectives.

Creating and applying to this national program the kind of measures GPRA expects is a task that many of us have said over the years is very difficult at best to accomplish in any meaningful way. And yet, we must now do it. Reporting on the specific responsibilities mandated by the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) is no longer enough. Whatever the difficulties of implementing GPRA, we cannot argue with the soundness of its fundamental goal. Neither can we ignore the political imperative to take it seriously and thereby ask ourselves honestly: What is the outcome of all our work? Is the outcome worth the investment?

I believe that facing up to GPRA boldly may also help us to overcome some of the misperceptions, lack of interest, and in some cases downright hostility that have hobbled this program, whenever the subject concerns the level of appropriations for the Historic Preservation Fund. For years we have collectively wondered why we just cannot seem to convey to non-preservationists the importance and value of this program in which we all believe so deeply. We get frustrated and angry at the persistent suggestions that real historic preservation can only mean putting hammer to nail and trowel to brick, while carrying out the SHPO duties spelled out in the NHPA is somehow just administrative overhead of lesser worth. My goal in implementing GPRA for the HPF is to demonstrate that the national historic preservation program as we know it does achieve valuable outcomes we that can measure, defend, and be proud of.

The outcome by which we must measure this program is found in the legislative title of the National Historic Preservation Act, itself: "An Act to Establish a Program for the Preservation of Additional Properties throughout the Nation..." If "preservation of additional properties" is the touchstone for the entire NHPA, we must be able to describe our accomplishments in those terms. I firmly believe we are, in fact, preserving more properties when we nominate or review projects or carry out our other activities. The question facing us is how to demonstrate that fact.

We have always been hesitant to claim credit for preserving something where that something is not within our direct control, and where what we have done cannot be said to ensure perpetual preservation. We must stop selling ourselves so short. The Act tells us to preserve historic properties, but the Act also defines the tools we are to use, and so creates some level of expectation for the degree of preservation and protection we can achieve. In our understandable efforts to limit our own accountability to those things we do ourselves, we have also been hesitant to claim credit for the preservation efforts of others. In doing so, we overlook the broad directives of the Act "to assist State and local governments . . . to expand and accelerate their historic preservation programs and activities" and to "give maximum encouragement to organizations and individuals undertaking preservation by private means." If, by our leadership, encouragement, assistance, and example, we contribute to the good works of others, we should be willing to take some credit. If our efforts are not leading to this outcome, we must reexamine our efforts. That is what GPRA is all about.