



Zoo Edition Archives - Fall 2002

Interview with Linda Sullivan, Project Manager:

WPZ: Can you briefly describe the purpose of your job?

LS: I manage capital construction projects here at the zoo. I enter the process once decisions have been made as to what the project is, where it should be located, and how much time and money is available. I think I'm like the driver, trying to get a van full of people from one point to another. The people on board are very creative and very committed to their vision of where we should go and how we should get there. Not all of those visions are the same – so I take each person's input, consider the whole picture, and get everyone to the destination point safely (and sanely!), on time, and without running out of gas (money, time and motivation).

WPZ: What is your background?

LS: I have a degree in landscape architecture from the U.W., and a degree in journalism from the U. of Nebraska. I like to write, love plants, and have always been interested in and inspired by outdoor environments. Project management offered the opportunity to combine these and other interests. It is especially rewarding to recreate and evoke a specific natural environment.

WPZ: What are some of the challenges in managing a project at the zoo?

LS: As in any project, you need to keep the big picture in mind, be alert to differences of opinions – some of which may not be obvious – and be aware of anything that might slip through the cracks. In general, ensuring that the whole design and construction team is moving in the same direction is challenging. At the zoo, the team includes representatives from many departments including horticulture, animal management, exhibits, education, visitor services, interpretation and marketing/development. The goal is to make a new exhibit work for all of these groups and the zoo's visitors.

The highest priority is always the animals. Their needs must be weighed against those of the grounds and animal keepers, and the aesthetics of the exhibit, all while staying within the limits of time and money, and keeping construction impacts to a minimum. The wild dog exhibit, which just opened at the zoo, includes two shallow pools. The pools have to be safe for the dogs we have now, and for puppies, should we have them in the future. The pools need to be drained and cleaned, so the keepers need easy access for daily operation. They need to be kept in good working order, so maintenance workers also need easy access. And access points need to be either aesthetically pleasing or invisible to visitors. For example, the hose and faucet that the keepers use for cleaning are easily accessible inside the fake tree stump in the middle of the water bank.

WPZ: What special skills do you need to be a project manager?

LS: Organizational skills are essential. Because I am dealing with money, a complete paper trail is imperative. I have to track expenditures, changes in design details and their subsequent expenses, and to produce project documentation with very little advance notice. There are a number of good computer applications to help with many aspects of managing a project, so computer literacy is important as well.

WPZ: What advice would you give to students who might want to be project managers?

LS: I've always wanted variety in my job, so I tried to develop the biggest bag of tools possible. My advice to students would be to learn as much as possible and develop as many skills as you can, so you can do many different projects, whatever looks most interesting. Learn to understand the strengths and areas of expertise of the people you work with on a project team and don't be limited by your lack of knowledge or experience. If it is a job that really interests you, go for it!