



Grants Provide Interpretive Exhibits for Forest Service Visitors

By Mike Ward

The majority of our visitors enter Red Rock Country from I-17 via SR 179. Through the efforts of many members of our community, SR 179 between Dry Beaver Creek and Back O'Beyond Road has been designated by Congress as the only All American Scenic Byway in Arizona and one of only 22 in the entire United States. When the former Red Rock Ranger District (RRRD) was sold in 2005, the Forest Service selected a new site for the RRRD two miles south of the Village of Oak Creek near the start of the SR 179 Scenic Byway. The RRRD Visitor Center now serves as the south gateway to Sedona and has become the first stop for many of our visitors.

The visitor center is operated in partnership between the US Forest Service, Sedona Friends of the Forest (FOF), and the Arizona Natural History Association (ANHA). It is open between 8 AM and 5 PM, seven days a week. I volunteer with approximately 50 other FOF members who staff over 650 hours at the visitor center every month, working alongside Forest Service staff and ANHA volunteers. Since opening in March 2008, the visitor center hosts between one and two thousand visitors every day, seeking information on opportunities to explore the natural wonders that surround Sedona.

When the visitor center opened in 2008, funding shortages prohibited the installation of interpretive exhibits. Our RRRD Forest Service staff and FOF volunteers, using approximately \$6,000 in funding from ANHA, designed and built the temporary exhibits currently on display at the visitor center. I worked with three local geologists, Paul Lindberg, Wayne Ranney, and Ron Blakey, to design and construct the current temporary geology exhibit.

Recognizing in 2005 that additional funding would be needed for interpretive exhibits, the FOF Board authorized me to write a Sedona Community Foundation (SCF) grant application for interpretive exhibit funding. The Forest Service and FOF identified a 3D interactive terrain model interpretive exhibit as a top priority for funding. The terrain model would serve to provide visitors with trip planning information for driving, hiking, biking and camping experiences, as well as opportunities to explore cultural heritage sites in the district.

In 2006, the SCF awarded us a three year \$24,000 grant for the design and construction of the terrain model. Although the grant funds were earmarked specifically for the terrain model, the SCF promotes the use of their grant awards to be used as matching funds to leverage additional grant funding from other sources.

Shortly after we were awarded the SCF grant, the visitor center's location presented an opportunity for us to apply for a \$400,000 All American Scenic Byway grant. The grant required a 20% local match. The Forest Service and FOF agreed to partner in applying for the grant, with each partner providing \$40,000 toward the required \$80,000 matching

requirement. FOF applied the \$24,000 SCF grant along with \$16,000 of FOF funds for their \$40,000 match. Sarah Belcher, Landscape Architect for the RRRD, and I wrote the grant and submitted the application.

We were awarded the \$400,000 All American Scenic Byway grant in November 2008 and notified that the funds had been appropriated by Congress in early 2010. A request for proposal was advertised and the project was awarded to Exhibit Design Associates (EDA) out of Boulder, CO, for the design, construction and installation of the interior and exterior interpretive exhibits. In late July, we met with representatives of EDA for a two-day planning charette. We discussed the Interpretive Design Plan that had been developed prior to the construction of the visitor center for both the exterior and interior interpretive exhibits.

The planned exhibits include a visitor trip planning exhibit to explore and discover the Sedona area, anchored by the interactive 3D terrain model. Also in the plan are geology, biodiversity and human history interpretive exhibits to help visitors understand and appreciate this special place. Messages to help protect and conserve this natural treasure will be woven into all of the exhibits. A multi-media theater will provide visitors with visual programs highlighting the area's local wonders.

The outside exhibits will interpret local wild flowers, pioneer gardens, as well as local plants and their use by Native Americans. An exhibit along the plaza railings will explain the geology and scenery that visitors are looking at.

If you are interested in making a difference, become involved with the Friends of the Forest. For information about the Friends, you are invited to contact the Red Rock Ranger Station at (928) 203-2900 and also visit our website at:
<http://www.friendsoftheforestsedona.org>

Serving Sedona, written this week by Mike Ward, a Past-President of the Friends of the Forest, appears Wednesday in the Sedona Red Rock News.