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SWST'S 2009 STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

"A *strategic plan* is a tool that provides guidance in fulfilling a mission with maximum efficiency and impact. If it is to be effective and useful, it should articulate specific goals and describe the action steps and resources needed to accomplish them" (Mittenthal 2002).

A new strategic plan for SWST was announced at the 2009 Annual Convention and will soon be distributed to the membership for approval. The process that led to this plan began last fall when it became apparent to members of the Board, particularly then-President Jerry Winandy and current President Jim Funck, that a current and readily accessible road map for the future of SWST – a strategic plan – would improve the governance and operations of the Society.

The greatest benefit to SWST is not the final document, but the process of developing that document. "A successful strategic planning process will examine and make informed projections about environmental realities to help an organization anticipate and respond to change by clarifying its mission and goals; targeting spending; and reshaping its programs, fundraising and other aspects of operations" (Mittenthal 2002).

SWST's last strategic plan was drafted in 1993 and updated in 1996. Since then, SWST has relied on several vehicles for documenting plans, activities, and changes in the operation of the organization. The Committee Handbook, which is updated annually, specifies the duties of officers, and responsibilities and special charges of the various standing committees. Members are kept informed of the activities of the Board and committees at the Annual Busi-

ness Meeting and through the SWST Newsletter. Board meeting minutes and committee reports are regularly published in the Newsletter. Communication with members also includes special mailings, e-mails, and editorials in *Wood and Fiber Science*.

This process works well enough for the Board. However, the membership is too often left in the dark, wondering, "Why did they do that?". Incoming committee chairs and Board members, not having participated in the deliberations that led the Board to make certain decisions, must try to acquire the "institutional memory" to understand and carry out their responsibilities. It is unreasonable to expect members, including the volunteer leadership of SWST, to take time to dig through numerous old newsletters to gain this sense of institutional memory. SWST will benefit from having a single, current, comprehensive, written document to provide direction for its future: a strategic plan.

The planning process provides the Board with an opportunity to communicate its collective thinking and rationale underlying its decision-making to the membership. It also provides an opportunity for members to participate by providing feedback and contributing their own concerns and recommendations to the board.

The document itself is intended to provide an easy reference for guiding the Board, the committees, and members in determining priorities and making progress toward improvement of the organization. It should provide focus for future activities of the Society and should contribute to continuity of successful programs.

It should also address needs of the profession to suggest where new programs and activities should be implemented and ineffective activities either improved or abandoned.

Strategic planning is a challenge. For SWST's strategic planning process to be successful, I believe two challenges are paramount.

- To be effective, SWST's strategic planning process must be ongoing. The "environmental realities" described by Mittenthal will change and SWST must be prepared to adapt. To be successful, the board and membership must make the effort to revisit, review, and revise the plan to keep it relevant to the changing needs of SWST and the profession.
- The strategic plan's credibility depends upon participation of SWST's membership in the process of its development. Although leadership for the process comes from the Board, the strategic plan must belong to the members. In May, a draft plan was sent to the membership for review and comment.

Responses contained valuable recommendations that are incorporated into a draft that will be sent to members for final comment. Members must be encouraged to continue to be active participants in planning and the Board must remain open to their ideas and recommendations.

Strategic planning offers us an opportunity to stimulate thinking, foster discussion, and take action for the benefit of SWST, its members, and the profession. Let's take advantage of that opportunity.

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REFERENCE

- Mittenthal RA (2002) Ten keys to successful strategic planning for nonprofit and foundation leaders. TCC Group, New York, NY. http://www.tccgrp.com/pdfs/per_brief_tenkeys.pdf (16 June 2009).