

Long-Range Planning Committee

Guild President Alice Nicholas formed the Long-Range Planning (LRP) committee in February 2013 to address issues we face as we grow our membership. Chaired by Marilyn Paluszak, it became readily apparent to the volunteers who gathered to form LRP that there were five topics the committee should address:

- 1) Facility management
- 2) Communication (downward and upward)
- 3) Fact gathering (surveys, focus groups)
- 4) Special needs for new chapters and new quilters/members
- 5) Training and succession planning for an all volunteer organization

Although listed third, fact gathering quickly became a priority as LRP members acknowledged that they, alone, should not attempt to define every aspect of every issue the Guild might have to face as it expands. Long-range planning is all about looking forward and then planning a route to obtain those goals. Any dream can become an attainable goal if you establish a budget and a schedule of incremental steps to get there.

The governance of the Guild rightly lies in the hands of the Executive Board which consists of our four Guild-wide elected officers and the Presidents and a Member-at-Large from each Chapter. LRP is not authorized to make decisions that would affect the Guild, including its many Chapters. Instead, it is our role to conduct research and bring issues to the Executive Board for resolution.

LRP's Mission

The LRP committee's mission is to identify issues, research options and find solutions to overcome obstacles so the Quilting Guild of The Villages may achieve its goals.

Long-range planning is all about understanding goals and identifying the steps and resources required to reach those goals. With input from the Executive Board and the Guild's general membership, LRP will identify issues that need to be addressed to ensure that the Guild is meeting, and can continue to meet, the needs of its diverse membership.

Long-range planning is all about understanding goals and identifying the steps and resources required to reach those goals, eliminating obstacles to success.

LRP will use a variety of research options, including asking for Guild volunteers to assist with specific issues. It is unlikely that all issues will have the same priority or share the same timeline for solution. Therefore, LRP will provide the Guild's Executive Board members with written recommendations for review and action as they are completed.

How LRP Operates

LRP meets in the Jasmine Room at Hibiscus Recreation Center on the 1st and 3rd Fridays of every month (9:30–11:00 a.m.).

To solicit input from people experienced with how the Guild and Chapters operate, we decided to hold a series of Focus Group discussions: beginning with Chapter Presidents, followed by Guild/Chapter Treasurers, Guild/Chapter Secretaries and moving on to both the Membership and Programs Standing Committees. All of that takes time. Over a series of several months, we met on the first Friday to plan the upcoming Focus Group session set for the next third Friday; and to review the information from the prior session. This is labor intensive as we are committed to documenting the information received.

What is a Focus Group?

Focus Groups are an inexpensive way for a not-for-profit to do market research. They are a group of people with something in common – in our case, quilters who have volunteered to fulfill specific roles within the Guild. The idea behind a focus group is to gather a 'representative group' of people in a setting structured enough to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate. Focus Groups are *not* brainstorming sessions where people toss out ideas although sometimes that is a way to stir up the conversations when looking for new ways to do things.

Focus Groups give everyone the opportunity to speak about each issue discussed. Our participants spoke about what works and what isn't working so well. LRP members took lots of notes but never attempted to attribute any comment to any one person. The goal was to identify the issues; not to set goals or to find solutions.

What did we find out?

Fortunately for LRP, Esther Meinhardt has prior experience as a Facilitator. Under her guidance we came up with a few specific questions for each group to discuss. We didn't want to limit the discussions by inadvertently being too precise in our questions or by providing them in advance. For a Focus Group to be effective, it often is the interactions between participants that bring the best results.

The Focus Groups turned out to be well worth LRP's time and effort and we are grateful to those who attended. We gathered a lot of information and created a consolidated report that we can and will use as a resource document as we move forward – we need to be ever mindful of all the issues and not overlook one while plowing ahead on another. The issues and obstacles mentioned at each group sometimes overlapped, sometimes not so much.

Although not planned, something else happened at our Focus Groups. Participants largely agreed that they benefited from the discussions, too. It was their first-ever opportunity to meet with their counterparts from other Chapters. We were not supposed to be looking for solutions, but more than one person left feeling that an annual meeting would be a good thing. Sharing experiences in a structured setting has become a goal.

What's next?

On October 18, 2013, LRP moved on to the next phase by hosting the Executive Board Focus Group. This was a special 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. event held at Colony Regional Recreation Center. Using the "Cumulative Focus Group Report" for a reference, LRP broke the participants into four groups: basically two for Chapter Presidents and two for Members-at-Large. Each group was assigned a specific topic for the morning and afternoon sessions so we could address eight issues. Members of the LRP committee are coincidentally also members of the Executive Board, so we spread ourselves around the room so that each table would have one or two LRP members who have been to most of the previous focus groups.

All 34 members of the Executive Board were asked to participate, even our newest Chapter from Big Cypress that was formed just days before, on October 1st. If a member could not participate, we requested an alternate who had prior experience with their role (as Guild officer, Chapter President, Member-at-Large, etc.). Twenty-six people attended; two Chapters were not represented which, in itself, speaks to the issue of running an all volunteer organization in a community as active as The Villages.

LRP will meet to discuss the results of each issue/topic discussed at the October 18th meeting. We have agreed to tackle two at each of our twice-monthly meetings. Where solutions are possible in the short-term, we will draft written recommendations and share those with Executive Board members for review and action. In other cases, we will create subcommittees to conduct further research on possible solutions and hold special interest focus groups, as needed.

If possible, at least one LRP committee member will be on every subcommittee; other volunteers from the Executive Board and/or general membership will be needed to help in this effort. All subcommittees will be required to provide written documentation of their meetings and findings to LRP and attend at least one follow-up LRP meeting to discuss those findings and possible solutions to obstacles.

Long-range planning is not about quick resolutions to immediate problems. It is about taking a studied look at the organization and helping the governing body plan for future growth as well as the wants and needs of its membership. We need to be aware of what is working – and what isn't – so the Guild will be a fun place to learn and share our love for the art of quilting for years to come.

LRP Membership:

Jeanette Flint, Lake Miona Member-at-Large

Joy Lynch, Chatham Member-at-Large and chair, Membership

Ruth Mazurski, Guild Vice President and chair, Programs

Esther Meinhardt, Piecemakers Co-President and LRP Focus Group Facilitator

Marilyn Paluszak, LRP *chair*, Allamanda Member-at-Large and Guild Webmaster

President Alice Nicholas, *ex officio*