

PROPOSAL TO ESTABLISH, TRAIN AND MANAGE A DISASTER CULTURAL ASSISTANCE TEAM (DCAT)

Preamble

Spurred by a one-day conference on cultural emergencies and the need for a forward-looking approach to managing cultural resources challenged by threats from the environment and terrorists held at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, a group has been meeting to lay the foundation for the development of a Cultural Emergency Management Team (CEMT) and related cultural disaster responses. Today, when a fire breaks out in a Boston building, a highly professionally trained firefighter responds to the situation. If a similar challenge is presented to one of the City's many cultural resources, there is a lack of a highly trained and developed talent pool in order to respond to the specific and unique response needs for cultural resources and assets. The initiatives which follow are all designed to not only create a model design for managing and minimizing risks to cultural resources, but also in creating a well reasoned and well rehearsed management approach which will bring expert resources and supplies to needed disaster situations.

The first phase of this activity is well underway with the creation and ongoing meetings of the Cultural Emergency Management Team (CEMT). Since January 2004, this group representing cultural institutions in the greater Boston area has been meeting regularly along with representatives primarily of the Federal Emergency Management Administration and the Boston Emergency Management Administration. While these meetings have been focused primarily on the formulation of plans and the discussion of grant funding possibilities, they have also permitted exploration of the many unique and diverse aspects of dealing with cultural resources and the planning required for effective disaster preparedness, disaster mitigation and disaster recovery.

Initiative One: The Cultural Emergency Management Team proposes the creation of a "strike team" to be called the Disaster Cultural Assistance Team (DCAT) which would respond under the usual incident command system now in place in Boston and throughout the Commonwealth as the means of response to disasters. This specialized strike team would be recruited principally from conservators in various disciplines located throughout the greater Boston area. Initial recruitment will seek a team of 25 individuals representing expertise in the conservation/preservation of the following cultural resources: historic buildings and gardens, libraries, archives, works of art on paper, sculpture and objects, textiles, and furniture. The team will be recruited from both the institutional/governmental sector as well as the private sector. Participation as a Disaster Cultural Assistance Team member will be strictly voluntary but it is expected to be accomplished with the employer's permission. The team will be in 24-hour, 7-day-a-week response mode and will operate as a regular and usual part of the incident command structure.

Initiative Two: An ongoing and essential part of managing cultural disasters and in mitigating and preventing disaster situations, is to develop both individualized and

group training in order to be prepared for the specialized needs of cultural institutions facing disaster and emergency situations. This training would include not only the ability to participate and receive appropriate certification for participation in the incident command system but also would enable team participants to share unique and special expertise across a wide variety of cultural resources. Training would also focus on the kinds of supplies and individual “react pack” materials which would be required for various disaster situations.

Initiative Three: With a strike team in place and the necessary initial continuing training, the challenge will be to integrate this new capacity into the usual disaster response systems. This will require an introduction of the Disaster Cultural Assistance Team to the usual first responders including fire personnel, police, emergency medical services, and others who are typically part of the incident command structures. Likewise these first responders will require additional training in order to understand both the language and special requirements for cultural disaster response.

Initiative Four: Critical to the ongoing success of both the Cultural Emergency Management Team and the specific Disaster Cultural Assistance strike teams is the need for ongoing surveys and site visits of cultural properties and cultural resources throughout the greater Boston area. The goal in this initiative is to have as many potential Disaster Cultural Assistance Team members do actual walk throughs of cultural properties or facilities which house cultural property in order to make suggestions for improvement of individual disaster/ emergency plans as well as mitigation measures. An outcome of this survey work may be to assist in the continued improvement of existing disaster/ emergency plans and the development of initiatives to mitigate future challenges to various cultural resources. Sites and institutions requesting these surveys may be asked to bear some, if not all, of the expenses associated with the surveys and reports. An attempt will be to assist in securing additional funding for not only development of mitigation plans but also the refreshment of existing disaster/ emergency plans.

Initiative Five: Clearly one of the outcomes of extensive survey and site visits will be to identify cultural resources which have no disaster or emergency preparedness plans. One of the primary outcomes is to help organizations understand the critical importance of having in place not only disaster preparedness plans but also mitigation and recovery programs as well. This initiative is designed to give encouragement as well as expert support, as appropriate, to cultural institutions both large and small in developing both a planning discipline as well as current, up-to-date plan documents.

Summary

The greater Boston area is a geographic locale containing an enormous variety of significant American and international cultural resources. As the birthplace of our Republic and as the locale for one of the most important aspects of our early history and discovery, Boston is home to rich collections in museums, libraries and a vast array of other cultural resources. The Cultural Emergency Management Team came together with the common goal of beginning the task of focusing institutional interest and resources on

the significant task of planning appropriate responses to mitigate and prevent, but if necessary, respond to cultural emergencies and disasters. The proposals contained herein reflect the initiatives which need to be undertaken, managed and accomplished in order for the work of the Cultural Emergency Management Team to move ahead to achieve its important goals. Many of the details and dimensions of each of the articulated initiatives need additional exploration, discussion, funding and implementation. For more information, please feel free to contact any member of the steering group of the Cultural Emergency Management Team. The team is chaired by Arthur Beale of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Secretary is Lori Foley, Northeast Document Conservation Center in Andover, and the team is convened by Bernard A. Margolis, Boston Public Library.