The Case for an Executive Director

Volunteers have run the NSS for over 80 years, accomplishing a tremendous amount in that time. However, the organization is now fortunate enough to have the resources for a full-time paid Executive Director. For a few years, the Board has been considering this option. The following pages define what an Executive Director might look like. We believe it is the best way to fulfill our mission of protecting, studying, and exploring caves while promoting fellowship among cavers.

An Executive Director is equivalent to a CEO for a non-profit. The position would oversee the operational components of the organization, while the Board of Governors would continue to guide the Society through governance and long-term planning. Hiring an Executive Director would help increase the capacity and focus of the organization in a way that only someone dedicated full time on a task can accomplish.

One of the biggest benefits of an Executive Director would be to remove the inherent obstacles of a volunteer structure. The NSS is run by five officers who act as a collective CEO. This allows volunteers with limited time to run the organization. We ask a lot of those officers, and they are stretched thin. Because serving in those roles is such a big ask, the Society struggles to fill them with qualified members. Burnout is rampant, and when turnover happens, things get dropped. This makes the job harder for the existing volunteer teams under these positions and the next person, disrupting the continuity and focus of our efforts. This process is cyclical.

The vast majority of issues with the NSS can be traced back to these volunteer limitations. It is clear from interviews with former NSS Directors and Officers going back to the 50’s, that these issues have been persistent for decades. It isn’t the people in the seats that hold us back—we’ve been served by fantastic, generous volunteers—it is the structure of the organization.

Substantial work has been done in the last three years to remedy this issue, including an entire committee dedicated to the task. A draft rewrite of the bylaws has been completed. A rough path forward on financing has been identified. Organizational structures have been discussed. We have spoken with previous NSS leadership. We have tapped the wisdom of members, other Executive Directors of similar membership associations, and non-profit consultants.

That work all pointed in one direction. If we want the NSS to be its most effective and to serve membership to the best of its abilities, hiring an Executive Director is the path that will take us there. After much research and years of consideration, the Board is now taking concrete steps towards this. **As we do, we would love membership feedback.**

We are excited for the next chapter in the NSS’ history and what we can accomplish together. If you have questions or feedback please reach out to BOG@caves.org.
DRAFT

The information on the following pages is not final. It is a high-level, draft proposal and is subject to change.
How Would the NSS be Structured?

An organizational chart showing the proposed structure is available on the next page. The high level structure will be as follows:

**Membership**
Membership will continue to be the heart of the organization and the ultimate source of the NSS’ direction.

**NSS Board**
Accountable to Membership, the NSS Board will consist of nine elected and three appointed board members, who will elect a Chair to liaise with the Executive Director. This maintains the current structure’s split between elected directors (12) and appointed officers (5), enabling the NSS to appoint individuals with essential skills. The work of the board can be summarized as Oversight, Insight, and Foresight. In order to accomplish these goals, the board will rely heavily on four board level committees which have all been recreated or revamped in the last couple years:

**Strategic Planning Committee:**
This committee facilitates the creation of the NSS’ Strategic Plan, which is the core of how the Board gives guidance to an Executive Director and sets long term goals for the society. The current Strategic Plan can be found here.

**Financial Review Committee**
The Financial Review Committee provides oversight of the NSS’ finances. Under an Executive Director Structure, this would likely expand beyond an annual review/audit to include providing guidance on internal financial controls.

**Bylaws Committee**
The Bylaws Committee makes sure that the NSS Bylaws are structured correctly with an eye towards clarity, legality, and minimizing micromanagement.

**Executive Search Committee**
Currently the Executive Search Committee works to source Officer candidates. Under an Executive Director Structure they would surface candidates for both the appointed & elected Board member positions.

**Executive Director**
Accountable to the Board, the Executive Director will be hired by the board. They will oversee the day-to-day, operational components of the society including paid staff and volunteers.
NSS Proposed Org Chart V1

**Notes:**
1. Each Year 3 Board Members Are Elected
2. Each Year 1 Board Member Is Appointed
3. The Board Elects A Chair From Any Of The Seated 12 Board Members
4. The Chair Is The Point Of Contact With The Executive Director
5. Four Board Level Committees Will Continue To Provide Significant Support:
   a. Finance Review
   b. Executive Search
   c. Strategic Planning
   d. Bylaws
6. At A Minimum, The Finance Review Committee Will Have Read Access To All NSS Financial Accounts
HOW WOULD WE PAY FOR THIS? IS THIS GOING TO INCREASE OUR DUES?

There is no plan to increase dues to accomplish this. Hiring an Executive Director is a significant financial investment. It is also one the Society is currently able to make. Due to good financial management and a number of very generous donations over the last few years, the NSS now has accumulated and earmarked a significant sum for paid positions. The interest of this amount could pay a substantial portion of an Executive Director's salary in perpetuity.

WILL THIS MAKE THE SOCIETY BUREAUCRATIC OR HIERARCHICAL?

Bureaucracy is always a challenge, but by making a single person accountable for performance, we are likely to increase efficiency over the current structure. And as always, the Board will continue to set long term goals and oversee the Executive Director.

IS THIS GOING TO CHANGE THE SOCIETY OR OUR CULTURE?

Membership will continue to elect Directors to the Board from our Membership. The Executive Director will report to that Board, specifically the Chair of the Board. Additionally, the Board will be responsible for setting the long-term goals of the Society and providing oversight.

We will continue to be a membership-guided, volunteer first organization, with the vast majority of volunteer positions being filled by NSS members.

THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WILL HAVE TOO MUCH CONTROL.

The Executive Director will report directly to the Board. Their responsibilities will be clearly defined. They will always serve at the discretion of the Board and can be fired if they do not perform.

The Board will provide direction and oversight through a number of mechanisms, primarily four Board-level committees that have been revamped and strengthened in the last few years: Finance Review Committee, Planning Committee, Bylaws Committee, and Executive Search Committee.

WHY CAN'T WE JUST HAVE A VOLUNTEER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR?

It isn't realistic to expect someone to run an organization of this size in 10 hours a week without pay. We have simply grown beyond what is capable with volunteer bandwidth.

Cont.
Frequently Asked Questions

WHY CAN’T WE JUST KEEP ADDING MORE OFFICERS?

There are a number of inherent issues with having five people collectively run an organization. It gets difficult to prioritize objectives. Activity under departments have a tendency to become silo’ed, and there is overlap of some teams under even the current Officer structure. Accountability is also more difficult for the Board to manage. The list goes on. With a single paid executive, we can be more capable and effective at accomplishing our mission statement.

OUR BYLAWS DON’T ALLOW THIS.

This will require a substantial change to our bylaws. A draft of the bylaws to allow this has been completed, and the Board intends to vote on changes this year. It was completed by a committee of Board members meeting twice weekly for over 10 weeks.

SHOULDN’T WE STUDY THIS ISSUE MORE?

Over the last three years, the Board has deeply considered this issue. A substantial amount of work has been completed in order to evaluate a potential Executive Director structure. This includes:

- Work of an entire committee culminating in a 31 page report on the issue
- Line by line evaluation and draft rewrite of the bylaws and acts
- Financial analysis of feasibility
- Over 30 hours of interviews with previous NSS leadership going back to the 50s
- Discussion with Board Members of similar nonprofit membership associations who undertook previous efforts to put an Executive Director in place
- Assessment of role responsibilities and key skill sets required
- Discussions with executive search firms, non-profit consultants, and Executive Directors at other organizations

HOW WOULD THE ORGANIZATION BE STRUCTURED?

This will require a substantial change to our bylaws. A draft of the bylaws to allow this has been completed. It was completed by a committee of board members meeting twice weekly for over ten weeks.

Additionally, in order to lighten the workload of the remaining volunteers at the top of the organization, the Officer remits will likely be split into six or seven departments.

A proposed [Organizational chart can be found here](#) and on a previous page in this document.

Cont.
Frequently Asked Questions

WILL THE ED BE A CAVER?

In an ideal world, the Executive Director would always be a caver. But, when it comes to finding the most qualified candidate, our priorities are finding someone who can run a large organization, not necessarily the best caver. This was the recommendation of the Executive Director Exploratory Chommitee and came from consultation with other organizations, executive search firms, and non-profit consultants.

Culturally, the organization will always be guided by the Board, likely a Chair of the Board that assumes some of the responsibilities of the President. In this way, the ‘soul’ of the organization will always be guided by a caver who is put in place by membership.

WHY HAVE APPOINTED DIRECTORS?

The current structure includes appointed Board members in the form of Officers and elected Board Directors. So this largely keeps the structure of the Board, including the percentage elected by membership nearly identical, while reducing the board size from 17 to 12.

The reason for appointing board members is that it allows the board to appoint positions for specific skills and expertise that the Officers have critically provided over the years.

HOW LONG IS THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR APPOINTED FOR? WHAT HAPPENS IF THEY DO A BAD JOB?

The Executive Director won’t be appointed. They will be hired by the Board as a paid employee and employed at the Board’s discretion. Like any employee, they have a job description, performance goals, annual evaluation, and they can be let go for underperformance.

WHAT WILL THEIR SALARY BE?

The average salary for a nonprofit executive director in 2021 ranged from $80,000 to $150,000 per year.

WILL THEY BE RESPONSIBLE FOR GENERATING MONEY THROUGH FUNDRAISING?

It will be part of the job description to oversee fundraising and grant writing efforts, and accountability for achieving budget (including fundraising) will be part of the position remit. However their salary will not depend on fundraising.

Cont.
Frequently Asked Questions

HOW DOES THIS PROPOSED STRUCTURE COMPARE TO OTHER SIMILAR MEMBERSHIP ASSOCIATIONS?

Many other non-profit, member based organizations are run by an Executive Director, program and administrative staff, and a Board of Directors elected by the membership. These Board Directors usually have staggered terms of service and elect Officers once a year. This is how the SCCi is organized, for instance, and this our proposal mirrors this non-profit best practice.

WILL WE BE HIRING OTHER PAID POSITIONS WITHIN THE LEADERSHIP OF THE NSS?

At this time, we are focused on hiring a full-time, salaried Executive Director to provide leadership and execute the NSS’ strategic plan. We also have two paid staff at the Headquarters in Huntsville. As we evolve, and based on the success of this model, the ED and Board may recommend hiring additional coordinators or operations staff, but that is not currently in our strategic plan.

WHY REDUCE THE SIZE OF THE BOARD?

The large board size allows the organization to seat all five Officers as board members under the current structure. With those positions gone, such a large board size becomes a liability. Studies consistently show that after 9-12 people you start to quickly lose efficiency at tasks without gaining much additional output. Ultimately, we want to make sure we have a group large enough to represent membership and to do the work of the board without becoming so large we lose efficiency.

Note that the % of the board members who are elected (Currently right now) and those who are appointed to the Board (Officers currently) will remain the same after the transition. Keeping that ratio the same was an intentional choice. However, since the appointed board members under the new structure will not be directly involved in operations, there is no need for a separate body to provide oversight. So all board members, once seated, will have the same rights and responsibilities under the new structure.

WHY SO MANY ‘DEPARTMENT HEADS’?

Many, if not all, of the department heads will remain volunteer positions. The more department heads, the less the workload of each volunteer. But there is a limit to the number of people an Executive Director could potentially manage. Studies tend to show that 6-7 tends to be the maximum number of people an individual can manage.