Dear Advisory Council Members

I want to provide you a brief summary of the Advisory Council meeting of October 30 and 31. I have held off on this until returning from Monterrey, Mexico, so I could report on the status of that activity, as it was a topic of the meeting.

First, I appreciate the attendance of those who could make the meeting. I already knew many of you from related activities, but I was especially gratified to finally meet some of you for the first time. I am sorry that we could not accommodate those of you who could not make it. I hope we can do better in the future.

From my perspective, I thought the meeting went very well. I got the guidance I needed to move HRI forward and implement what you all have expended so much time and effort to establish. I want to provide you a brief summary of my impressions.

On Thursday a number of council members came in earlier enough for the fieldtrip to the university’s Laguna Madre Field Station. Much work has been done there to accommodate students of all levels, for both day and multi-day stays. We use the facility for a number of our outreach activities. The objective of the fieldtrip was show council members some of the opportunities we have to expand regional outreach efforts and (equally important) to get members out into the environmental we are all working to conserve.

The Thursday event at the Town Club provided an opportunity for me to meet members and most importantly to introduce Dr. David Yoskowitz, the newly appointed chair for Socio-Economics. David gave a very informative dinner presentation that provided a framework for his future efforts. It was very exciting and his appointment was one of my first and most significant actions as director.

The Friday meeting started with a breakfast with the HRI faculty, staff and students – close to 100 showed up! It was a very visible demonstration of just how much HRI has grown in influence and in building positive relationships with the university. The breakfast concluded with a short film presentation about the “Dead Zone”, an area of low oxygen water off the Mississippi River, which forms each year because of nutrient overloading. The film was put together by HRI student Anthony Reisinger as part of his NOAA summer fellowship and it is being considered for a national award, as well as, being slated for showing at the Smithsonian’s new Ocean exhibit. It is just one indicator of the quality of our HRI students.

The actual meeting was initiated by Dr Earle and she established a very positive framework for the day’s activity. Dr Furgason followed to thank the members of the Advisory Council for their past efforts and to wish HRI well as it moved forward. Dr. Killebrew attended the meeting and added his welcome the council.
Presentations by Endowed Chairs

Each of the endowed chairs made presentations about what they were doing and what was of greatest priority. I will not summarize them here, but their PowerPoint presentations are being loaded on the website and I will let you know when they are done and where to find them. I will pick out a number of action items from their presentations to report on here.

One item that generated a great deal of discussion was Dr. McLaughlin’s summer student program: “International Perspectives on Sustainable Governance for the Gulf of Mexico.” It is designed to provide an inter-disciplinary group of graduate level students from the United States and Mexico with relevant knowledge about Sustainable Ocean Governance through a regional and international learning experience. Students will learn how to analyze theoretical and practical challenges in the Gulf of Mexico Region in order to identify key issues of concern as well as some of the strategic actors and stakeholders influencing decision-making in ocean governance. It was exciting enough an idea that both Dr Earl and Joe Hornblower contributed $1,000 each, on the spot to help fund it! Thanks to both of you. I am happy to report that we are now close to assembling about half of the funding we will need ($50,000) to make this effort a reality.

Another initiative focused on Mexico is an effort to reduce over-fishing of important marine areas where the activity threatens ecosystem function. It is a partnership with private industry, the University of Texas Marine Science Institute, TAMUCC and HRI. We have decided to focus on La Pesca, Mexico for a pilot project. Advisory Council member Dr. Eric Gustafson has agreed to help us to develop this project.

A report was also provided that summarized the extramural (grants and contracts from federal, state and local sources) that were awarded to HRI last year. They currently exceed $2,000,000. This is very good news as it demonstrates the leveraging impact of the Harte research and charitable funds, which are the mainstay of HRI. There are two important points to keep in mind, in addition to this most significant one. First, we will have to make sure we do a very good job on these projects as economic conditions will significantly shrink funding sources. We need to maintain a good reputation for completion of work, to better compete for fewer dollars. Second, these obligations will require significant HRI resources to meet. The extramural funds are restricted in use for specific targets and goals. Directing and working on the projects will take significant time and effort of our chairs and staff, which will limit our ability to take on new obligations. It is the common result of success, so we cannot complain. It dramatically points out how important it is for us to focus efforts on building partnerships with others to advance the HRI vision and mission.

Every presentation by the endowed chairs generated considerable discussion. Many council members noted to me during the day and after the meeting, that
they greatly appreciated hearing from the chairs and that they were impressed by all that was happening at HRI. The presentations provided a valuable framework for the afternoon discussions.

**In Memory of Tom Theriot**

We had a very special lunch presentation in memory of Tom Theriot. HRI presented a laptop computer to one of our summer program high school students. Rather than detail it here please give me a call, if you are interested in the details. It was very special and moving to all in attendance.

**Building Partnerships**

Advisory Council member Raul Rodriquez reported to the council about the formation of the Water Center for Latin America and the Caribbean, as part of the initial presentation of the FEMSA Foundation. FEMSA is the largest brewer and bottler (Coca-Cola) in Latin America. Raul did more than report; he got us an invitation to the establishment ceremony. Will Harte and I attended the event in Monterrey. It was a very rewarding visit. Follow up discussions were very positive about establishing relations with the new organization.

Water is the single most important natural resource issue for the America’s and in reality, for the world. Our goal will be to build an international partnership to include the Latin America Center, HRI, The River Systems Institute (directed by council member Andy Sansom), and similar organizations, as well as, academic organizations like TAMUCC and Monterrey Tech, to address the many pressing water issues we face today. Council members Raul Rodriquez, Eugenio Clariond and Dr. Eric Gustafson have expressed their support to make this successful and it is much appreciated. I am very excited about the possibilities. Developing the idea will be a very high priority for me. I have attached the document I presented to new centers director for your information.

**Development Activities**

It is very clear that if we wish to advance the HRI vision and mission we will need to develop additional funding sources. One of the important messages for this council meeting was that with the addition of the sixth planned chair, HRI is as fully staffed and as engaged as our base funding will allow. Our last two chairs – Ocean Health and Economics - are not fully endowed because of this limitation. Considering the economic conditions, we are perhaps even over committed and that is something we will deal with in our budget process. The point being, that the budgetary flexibility HRI once enjoyed is greatly diminished. We will more and more have to focus on a few priority areas - priorities that will best enable us to meet our mission. The challenge will be how to make best use of available funds and how can we leverage those funds.
Grants and Contracts are one mechanism and as I noted earlier we are fast approaching capacity for our existing staff resources. Our development activity will focus on individuals, business and organizations that may be willing to contribute directly to HRI in support of our vision and mission, at a significant level. If we are to be successful, especially in the current economic climate, we have several challenges before us.

One of those challenges is to clearly define just what we are raising funds to do. It always helps to be able to explain to donors as specifically as possible what you would be doing with contributed funds. That list, while draft at this point and awaiting your input, includes efforts to:

- Expand scientific research. We must raise resources to support HRI Research Associates so they can focus on issues and problems of HRI priority. Funds to cover summer salaries, graduate research assistantships and release time are cost effective ways to accomplish this goal.
- Build scientific exchange programs between Mexico, the USA and Cuba. Supporting graduate and post-doctoral exchange, as well as, programs like the summer program being developed by Richard McLaughlin, is a key to our mission of disseminating information about the Gulf of Mexico.
- Support partnerships and activities to advance conservation and sustainability of the Gulf of Mexico. Environmental challenges like climate change and sea level rise, assuring environmental water, fisheries and conservation of biodiversity will require significant resources to address.
- Ocean exploration. Building public support for conservation and collecting the data and information to support active management, as well as, addressing concerns about marine protected areas will be an important foundation for future progress.
- Outreach. An important component of the HRI mission is to disseminate information about the Gulf ecosystem and its economic value. While local and regional efforts have been successful on that scale, HRI must look to activities that have Gulfwide application.

A second challenge is the fact that HRI does not have the communications strategy in place to support an aggressive development strategy or to adequately support the mission: to provide international leadership in generating and disseminating knowledge about the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem and its critical role in the economies of the North American region. While academic communications tools like Gulfbase and publications through the TAMU Press have been outstanding, they are not so effective for communications with conservation-minded individuals and organizations, nor versatile enough for development needs.
A New Advisory Council Structure

HRI is now moving from its formative stage into an implementation phase. The question is what is the best advisory structure to support HRI? This was the topic of considerable discussion at the meeting and several recommendations were offered for consideration. If you have additional thoughts I am certainly open to hearing them. It is my goal to make a decision by the first of next year. In the meantime I will work closely with those members of the Advisory Committee that have expressed their interest in, and support of, the priority issues summarized in this communication, while keeping the Advisory Council updated on a regular basis.

Again, thank you for support of HRI and your warm welcome to me. I look forward to a long and productive relationship as we endeavor to “make a difference.”

Larry McKinney