

Original Post on RASC National Council Forum 12:32 PM, October 30, 2021

Fellow National Councillors,

I am asking for the level of interest your Centre may have in using the new Driven membership system to act as a host for your Centre's website.

As background, the Belleville Centre's website (<https://rascbelleville.ca>) was developed by one of our members a number of years ago, but that member left the area. As a small centre we do not have the expertise to support the website from within our membership and do not have the finances to contract both the on-going website support and upgrade the application software to current technology.

As the new national membership system was in the planning stages, we had asked if local centre website hosting was possible. Based on answers received at the time, we decided to place on hold any initiatives to make our own website supportable by current technology.

Now that the initial phases of introducing the national Driven membership system are complete, I would like to gauge interest across all of the RASC centres to determine if there is sufficient interest to request our Board of Directors to make local centre web-site hosting as a priority.

I know that any changes will not be provided by Driven for free, but feel that creating and supporting one system will be less overall cost than every centre finding their own solution.

My request is for you to take this request to your local Centre to gauge interest, and provide a "ball-park" estimate of your Centre's annual website support costs.

Please note that I do not want to raise expectations that any action will be taken by our Board of Directors or national office at this point in time – my request is to see if we should pursue this as an initiative that may end up saving some money and effort.

Thanks in advance,
Don Town,
NC Rep, Belleville Centre

From: Robert rfminden@gmail.com November 2, 2021 2:38 PM

Interesting. Who Knew. Drupal is supposedly one of the popular ones. Good information to know. Bob

From: Randy Boddam <mailto:dr_druid@msn.com> November 2, 2021 2:14 PM

Hey all! Just a quick comment. When I was on the Board the national website and store were using Drupal and there seemed to be ongoing problems with updates... I suspect that this would lead to a need for ongoing webmastering... cheers, randy

From: Robert rfminden@gmail.com November 2, 2021 10:39 AM

Interesting replies Don. Seems like not much interest in having this done at the national level. Maybe that's why national dropped it.

The ideal situation would be to find a web programmer interested in taking on the Rascbelleville site as a project to just clean it up and modernize the code. At QCS, our network guy thinks highly of WordPress and suggested we use that, but there are some unknowns.

Here are some additional thoughts.

1. Even if we find someone to cleanup and modernize the current website, it is an ongoing effort and may get out of date again in a few more years anyway.
2. Going with something like WordPress or the other ones mentioned like Wix and Drupal etc., should be immune to this as they should be keeping all their code up to date. I don't know how that works though and it might require annual rebuilds or updates to take place. Hopefully they are automatic, and I will try to find that out.

3. It would be nice to find out if any of the other centres have a public and a private message board feature like Belleville, since that seems to be the main requirement. All the brochure stuff on the website is static and can be easily accommodated by any of the web systems.
 4. We need to pare the site down to just what is needed and nothing more. For instance I don't think anyone uses the Members Library, so maybe that section should go.
 5. We need to find out if these other systems can deal with private and public areas easily and how easily members can upload images like we do now.
 6. Can these other systems deal with automated mass emails when a new image or message is uploaded into the site. I'll try to find out.
-

FYI, Francois has his own web site written with WordPress - see: <http://vanheerden.ca/>

Replies from NC Reps

William Haskett (Sunshine Coast) 02:08 PM November 01, 2021

Before you start to pay for professional website services, there are several services (I use Weebly) that allow you to put together a website without knowing anything about coding, Almost the same as putting together a word document.

Paul Sadler (Ottawa) 02:51 PM November 01, 2021

I have forwarded the Q re: website hosting to our webmaster for Ottawa Centre, as well as our President for the Council to consider. I confess that I suspect most Centres are going to be of two minds for this idea.

First, the theory is delightfully attractive. The idea of a main RASC site, lots of subsites built upon the same architecture, bulk discounts to manage, economies of scale, and all you need are simple subdomains to manage the various Centre's sites, and maybe slightly different child themes to allow for stylistic changes? I love the idea personally, but I'm not the webmaster who would have to manage it for a Centre.

Second, we already had tried some form of this previously with sites like (centre).rasc.ca and I don't think many Centres were completely happy with the result. In addition, given the challenges some Centres are having with Driven for financial reporting or even membership lists, let alone everyone's issues with simple list participation for attachments (as flagged here previously and on RASCals too), there may be a lot of lukewarm reaction to tying their website to it too. I also suspect that large centres like Toronto or Vancouver who have very sophisticated sites would find the base offerings to be a step down. Or, alternatively, even if it was offered, the degree of work to "change over" to a Centralized option (if RASC National even feels they could/want to go that route again) is not insignificant.

For a small Canadian Centre, they might prefer to simply pay \$60/year for a light webhost package, plus \$20 for the domain, and run a WPress or DRUPAL site pretty easily. Or, as was mentioned, go with a WIX-style design, without any National overlords to be updated/listened to/respected. :) For what it's worth, I have two personal sites that allow me unlimited sites and subdomains to be added (albeit with no extra speed or memory!), and I run two other sites off it for "free" -- a management consulting site for a family member that is relatively static and an astronomy site for an observatory. Lots of people have packages like mine, so a small site might not be too hard to find a space for if you have any techno volunteers at all. Which would reduce your price to just the domain cost. Just a thought or two...

I'll leave it to our Centre Webmaster (Mick Wilson) to get back to you on the official Ottawa Centre response.

Paul Sadler

June MacDonald (New Brunswick) 08:32 PM November 01, 2021

Hi. I will certainly run this by our council & webmaster for feedback Right now, from the few who have made comments on the Driven site- it is not well liked at all. However that could be due to people not watching any training videos or giving it an in-depth try. I'm not sure. This will be brought to our next council meeting for discussion. We have a skilled webmaster now, who has spent an enormous amount of time setting up our current website. We are very pleased with our website as it is. I don't think any member would be happy changing to a change to another site, that has a learning curve. I would not want our webmaster to feel insulted or scorned after developing a website that works very well for us. I'm lost amongst digital/electronic stuff, so I have to ask would this mean every centre's site would have a similar appearance & function? If so, I think we'd say no. I'll bring it to the business meeting & get back to the list. Thanks for bringing this up Don. It sounds interesting.

June MacDonald

Judy Black (Halifax) November 2, 2021 10:32 AM

Good day!

Our site is hosted at Saint Mary's University (SMU) and we use Joomla! for the site. There are 2 others besides myself who have the administrative rights to edit the site (it must be easy or I couldn't do it as I am not tech savvy). We had used another program until about 4-5 years ago then switched to Joomla! that made it easier to add and edit and didn't require SMU to do it on our behalf.

The reaction to the national site here has not been favourable with some of our members. For example, suggesting using the Forum method for Centre announcements was met with great resistance so not sure how changing our website would be received.

Question: If there was a method by which a central site could be set up as requested, could links to the each Centre be provided? This could possibly negate the need to change what has already been established. Those Centres without a website could then acquire assistance in setting one up using whatever program allows for the suggestion above. Just a thought.

Judy Black, Halifax Centre

black.judy@gmail.com <mailto:black.judy@gmail.com>
jblackns@icloud.com <mailto:jblackns@icloud.com>

Alister Ling (Edmonton) 12:31 PM November 02, 2021

Hi Don, I think it might be a good idea for a group of smaller Centres.

I think the challenge would be for the larger Centres to give up the features/flexibility they currently have. That said, I can imagine a single Wordpress front page with 30 icons, some which take you to already established sites, and the others to the smaller Centre webpages "underneath".

Here's what our Edmonton Centre webpage lead said about our site and costs:

"In terms of money costs, RASC Edmonton Centre pays about \$200/year for domain registration, website hosting (which includes WordPress). We use GreenGeeks for this service.

In terms of person costs, the use of WordPress has greatly reduced the effort to maintain the website. There are two principal reasons: (1) WordPress makes it quite easy to maintain a website that looks modern, has dynamic content on the home page, easily integrates with social media feeds, and is responsive/mobile friendly. (2) With WordPress, we can have a team of users that each manages their specific contents via posts and pages. This is volunteer friendly since it is easy to learn, the look-and-feel is consistent, and no one can accidentally break the website or accidentally modify other people's content. RASC Edmonton Centre has 7 content authors, each of which spends perhaps 1 hour per month on new content."

Final comment from Alister: And I would emphasize perhaps. My Intro To Stargazing segment takes me 10 minutes to copy/paste/edit and change graphics and a bit of text for the upcoming month.

Alister Ling

Michael Wilson (Ottawa) 05:17 PM November 02, 2021

Ottawa Centre web site using the Drupal CMS on the GreenGeeks hosting service.

As I write this, we are separating this from the co-hosting arrangement that National has provided to ourselves and Regina for the four years that I have been managing our site. One major reason for this separation is a major outage earlier this year which was impossible to rectify within the limited levels of authority available either to me or to my point of contact. Similarly, there have been since 2016 required version upgrades that no-one at National has succeeded in deploying.

Hence Ottawa has spun up an independent site with virtually full autonomy over operations and maintenance. This new site is configured to provide "sandboxes" for configuring, testing and deploying the version upgrades mentioned above. A key aspiration is for a site that is more stable, secure and readily managed for my successor.

Other drivers for relocating include:

- reducing the workload arising from constraints inherent in National's hosting contract e.g. for 3 years it was impossible to upload any file larger than 8Mb;
- increasing the flexibility with which site needs between public outreach, Centre operations and historical archive can be balanced, and
- easier generation and shipping of off-site backups, and easier validation of those.

So, all that to say that Ottawa centre does not see benefit in participating in group hosting. As each centre must, we have made our analysis of cost versus capability for web services and have elected for autonomy because we do have in-house technical expertise.

And on that final point: I am happy to entertain requests for ad hoc tech support to centres that need it. I have had 40-year IT career, 15 years of running operational Drupal sites in windows and linux environments, and much practical experience with content management. I suspect that there are others on this list (such as Paul) with similar skill sets, and wonder who else among us might be able to give a hand to other centres?

Cheers.

Marcellus Redmond (St.John's) 7:14 am November 4, 2021

The newly elected council of the St.John's Centre held their first meeting last night. The views expressed mirror much of what has been said above. If the centres were to gather under one banner local flavour would be lost. While there could be some advantages, at this point our centre sees no need to pursue this course.

William Haskett (Sunshine Coast) 2nd reply 03:30 PM November 04, 2021

Consensus seems to be building that Centres like their own website and current hosting. This is good. We have a couple people in our small Centre who look after our website and I, as the Social Media Coordinator" oversee and coordinate our branding and online presence.

But, there are advantages in creating a small, single "referring" page where we can briefly describe our Centre and redirect the people to our own websites.

This has the advantage of maintaining a placeholder in the central site, and doesn't disappoint the users as they jump Centre to Centre... some fully populated, and others missing.

Having a page on the central site would take little if any maintenance by each Centre but provide visitors with a consistent way to see or be led to the specific Centre's site. Consistency is everything, well okay, consistency is at least a lot.

Paul Sadler (Ottawa) 2nd reply 5:13 PM November 04, 2021

Hi Bill...I'm assuming you mean an option for something "more" than we have now for the links to the individual centres. (<https://www.rasc.ca/centres>). I'm not sure what we would want on ours over just linking to take us to the site. Curious what others would want on a "national" landing/referral page.

William Haskett (Sunshine Coast) 3rd post 5:36 PM November 04, 2021

Yes. Each Centre could provide a little more splash for a single page so that it would appeal more. The current brief outline really doesn't allow for anything more than a lookup (and ours was wrong so I reported it). For reference, ours is <https://rasc.ca/sunshine-coast>

The idea would be a single page minimum with a leader to the official local page. This would provide consistency across the Centres and still allow those Centres wishing to have their full site centralized to do so without making the full site seem partially constructed. It is conceivable that the initial page could take the place of the existing rudimentary contact page, that at least for us, doesn't seem to load completely. We would likely need to have a little consistency, maybe in a side pane, that would provide basic contact info, regular meeting details, possibly a map and a list of neighbouring Centres.