**Board of Trustees Waynesboro Advocacy Committee**

**Virginia Museum of Natural History**

January 2, 2024, 1:00 PM

Waynesboro Economic Development Center

Attendance:

Present: Tom Benzing, Greg Hitchin, Faye Cooper, Joe Keiper, Jonathan Martin, Mary Zell Galen

Absent: Maggie Van Huss

Virtual: Mark Buss, LeAnn Binger, Carole Nash, Len Poulin, Ryan Barber

1. Welcome

Tom Benzing:

* Called meeting to order, and announced that the meeting has a quorum.

1. Approve of November 2023 meeting minutes

Tom Benzing:

* Requested the approval of the November 2023 meeting minutes.
  + Minutes were approved by Greg Hitchin, seconded by Mark Buss.

1. Detailed Design discussion

A. Building design

Joe Keiper:

* One more content coordination call next week discussing other areas of the museum. Fish working group via Zoom will happen in the relatively near future.
* Dr. Carole Nash: Has there been any process working with the Monacan Indian Nation in terms of exhibit design?
  + Joe Keiper: No progress on design has been made since last meeting.
* Tom Benzing: After next meeting, what will the schedule be?
  + Joe Keiper: It depends when we get our funds.
  + Tom Benzing: This could be when Monacan Nation gets involved, as well as bringing in community groups.

B. Budget

Joe Keiper:

* Going through another value engineering meeting with Glave Holmes because numbers just weren’t adding up. Managed to get the material costs down and got budget close to the 18.6 million dollar goal. Submitted to DEB before the holidays. State will then backfill the detailed design budget.
  + Jonathan Martin: This is a normal part of process, and making practical changes like lower cost masonry.
* Tom Benzing: When we cut back on things, would like to save parts of the project to be sponsored by a private donor. These elements will provide naming opportunities for elements like solar panels and planting.
  + Joe Keiper: Because the building is required to be LED silver-equivalent, will go back to add certain green elements.
* Jonathan Martin: VMNH hasn’t been billed for content coordination calls to maintain momentum, while the museum has been billed for more formal meetings.
* Tom Benzing: What does WAC need to focus on for the General Assembly?
  + Joe Keiper: Project is out of elected officials hands, and waiting on state staff.
  + Jonathan Martin: Waiting for six pack, DEB staff, etc. to maintain progress. Senate and House finance committee have access to same system, and project will be available for those legislators to review after DEB finishes.
* Joe Keiper: We can write a letter from BOT to the head of DPB to encourage progress on the project. Want to be aggressive, but don’t want to put pressure on staffers because they handle our annual budget.
  + Faye Cooper: Is this the way all capital projects go?
    - Joe Keiper: Don’t have experience to know. Referred to Ryan Barber to ask about comparable delays 15 years ago.
    - Ryan Barber: The capital funding was approved in 2001-2002, and broke ground in late 2004. Not sure how long it took to get the capital funding approved, but four years from approval to construction.
  + Faye Cooper: Concerned about project not receiving the full amount?
    - Jonathan Martin: DEB is managing issues relating to cash flow and will release the funding eventually.

1. Responding to the Governor’s Budget

* Joe Keiper: The city contracted with McGuireWoods six months ago, which is expired. A new contract has been requested.
  + Len Poulin: Has the city committed to renewing the contact?
  + Joe Keiper: It’s the foundation funding it, not the city, but need to see what costs will be.
* Tom Benzing: Received funding for operations in the biennium budget, and a note for capital reserve to be sent renovating the trailer. Did not appear in the capital outlay budget, so do not have construction funding for the biennium.
* Greg Hitchin: The city is writing an email to Sen. Head and Del. Campbell asking them to consider writing a budget amendment.
  + Joe Keiper: VMNH also sent them summaries about the project about two weeks ago.
  + Greg Hitchin: Construction costs have doubled since starting the project a decade ago, which should encourage them progress.
* Tom Benzing: Any further information from the October meeting about why VMNH is not include?
  + Joe Keiper: Never received that level of attention following a budget. The governor’s position in September was to cull buildings and encourage cohabitation with agencies, and VMNH is caught in that challenge. Other agencies we’re also impacted.
* Len Poulin: When VMNH met with Steve Landis, he recommended attending hearings for the Senate Budget and Appropriations committees. He also recommended reaching out to as many staffers as possible for those committee members about the project.
  + Joe Keiper: Not all committee slots have been filled.
  + Greg Hitchin: New senators aren’t in office until next week. Almost no legislators have submitted legislation.
  + Len Poulin: Could we meet with permanent staffers connected to these committees?
    - Jonathan Martin: Can potentially meet with them about an amendment, but staff are directed by the legislator. All current employees have seen the project.
    - Joe Keiper: Will continue to push to get help for advocacy.
* Tom Benzing: If you want to participate in public hearings for finance and appropriation committees, need to register on ILS VA by 4 pm to speak tomorrow. Encourage committee members to register themselves. Additionally, once we know committee members, we should reach out to their staffers.
* Dr. Carole Nash: Has been using the LIS for years to follow the General Assembly, and has never seen a year with so few bills filled before the session began. Wonders if this lack of bills reflects all the change in the General Assembly and legislators looking for their allies. It feels like in next few weeks, VMNH will see an explosion of legislation.
  + Joe Keiper: If there’s an explosion of bills, it could be easier to slip a small project in.
  + Greg Hitchin: Isn’t a budget amendment different than a bill? Got the impression that all the pre-filling was done.
  + Jonathan Martin: There’s a learning curve for new legislators.
* Tom Benzing: Could Senator Hanger put the amendment in before he leaves office in partnership with Senator-Elect. Head?
* Mark Buss: How do we know they submit legislation?
  + Tom Benzing: Can search on LIS, but likely will not reach out to everyone impacted by amendments. Need a chief patron on each side, which city is asking for.

1. General Assembly preview
   1. Virginia Conservation Network presentation

Tom Benzing:

* Lots of new representatives, with increased diversity and younger leadership. Minority leadership is Todd Gilbert from Shenandoah County. Finance Committee is from Fairfax, but Del. Chris Runion is on the committee.
* Will speak to house hearing committee tomorrow about the project.
* Have other local leadership on the senate side. With all new leadership, someone with just 1-2 terms have a lot of seniority. Full committee lists aren’t available.
* Lobby Days going on for water (1/29) and conservation (1/30), and VMNH is scheduled for 2/7.

b. Additional discussion

* Joe Keiper: Doesn’t know what to expect from the General Assembly but will put together a marching orders document that VMNH will share tomorrow morning. Will also include a checklist.
* Tom Benzing: When thinking about remarks to share with the finance committee, when children visit a museum, there’s a connection to performance in school. Is there statistics backing this up?
  + Joe Keiper: Material is from AAM has data.
* Len Poulin: General Assembly has already approved the project for Waynesboro. Argument needs to be why do it now, and why doing the project later will be a bad thing. Need to create a sense of urgency.
  + Joe Keiper: Obvious is that VMNH is missing reaching students, who graduate every year and won’t get to graduate and have those benefits.
* Len Poulin: Shared article about changes to education, and how students make use of what they know. Can apply that to k12 impacts in Waynesboro.
* Tom Benzing: Another line of argument is state has tradition of not leaving projects on the shelf. After they provide additional funding, they don’t want to abandon the project.
* Maggie Van Huss: Can we go to Sen. Hanger directly to ask for amendment?
  + Tom Benzing: Need to balance including Sen. Head to not go over the new representatives.
  + Joe Keiper: Can call Sen. Hanger and Del. Avoli’s offices to ask new representatives for budget adjustments.
* Tom Benzing: Not a lot WAC can do until we get the amendments in.
* Len Poulin: Do we know what rough spots are in terms of the budget? What are we competing with in terms of funding?
  + Greg Hitchin: Provided lists of projects, including income tax/ sales tax changes.
* Joe Keiper: Projects approved are all approved from outside funding. At least VMNH does not have to compete against them, and VMNH’s project is a lot smaller than a lot of other projects.

1. Community Connections/ Events
   1. Updates on Mobile Outreach Trailer

Joe Keiper:

* Most of the wrap is put on and will finish once weather is warmer. Still completing basic maintenance and are fixing that roof. The inside looks good, considering VMNH had five weeks to finish. Going to expand exhibits for Riverfest.
* Faye Cooper: Interest in volunteering and will connect to make list of volunteers. Need to identify days, and need to develop a schedule, potentially around farmers market.
  + Tom Benzing: Need power to trailer and need to rent generator for project.
  + Joe Keiper: Will try and get generator from maintenance reserves funding. Will also talk to Jon Miles to about solar system to run trailer.
* Mark Buss: Need a local person as point person to coordinate trailer, so burden is not on staff. Mary Poulin seemed excited and she can potentially do it.
  + Joe Keiper: Already put together a cheat sheet for exhibits, but then will begin to schedule.
  1. Wayne Theatre Science Talks (1/16, others upcoming)
* Tom Benzing: Talk on trout streams and water quality, and Joe will attend. Next month on storm water management.
  1. Daughters of the American Revolution talk (3/14)
* Joe Keiper: Will present with Len Poulin to the group.
  1. Riverfest (4/27)- VMNH will participate in the trailer.
* Tom Benzing: Spirit animal is Eastern screech owl. VMNH could do an owl pellet activity.
* Faye Cooper: John Spahr with the Augusta Bird Club is a resource on screech owls.

1. Open Discussion

Library office hours

* Tom Benzing: Having diminishing returns on participation and could be better to hold in the trailer. Could also hold on Saturday mornings.
  + Greg Hitchin: Farmer’s market restarts in April.

Trailer

* Faye Cooper: asked about security concerns for trailer.
  + Joe Keiper: Trailer is locked and secured. Considering security cameras.

1. Adjourn

Tom Benzing:

* Next meeting scheduled for Tuesday, February 6, 2024, the day before Lobby Day. Logistics will be shared in the future.