

**BOARD OF TRUSTEES
RESEARCH AND COLLECTIONS COMMITTEE MINUTES
November 16, 2024**

Present at the meeting were Dr. Art Evans, Mark Buss, Dr. Tom Benzing, Dr. Melany Stowe Clark, Dr. Kal Ivanov, Dr. Adam Pritchard, Abigail Gump, and Ben Williams.

Committee Chair Dr. Art Evans called the meeting to order. The committee circulated the acquisitions sign-off sheet and approved it unanimously.

Dr. Art Evans congratulated Dr. Kal Ivanov on his promotion from Associate Curator to Curator. Evans said that the museum was fortunate to have Ivanov and that he first met Ivanov right before his first board meeting. Between Ivanov and Dr. Jackson Means, Evans said, VMNH has become a powerhouse of an institution in regard to its work on recent invertebrates.

Dr. Art Evans then brought up the August board retreat at the Danville Science Center and the discussions that led from that meeting. The trustees emphasized the importance of Research and Collections as the museum's central focus and suggested that additional staff be hired for collections management. While the museum staff performs admirably, Evans said, the institution is short-staffed, and more work needs to be done to add additional staff.

Additionally, Evans said, more space is needed for storing collections, and while the museum's Douglas Avenue site is important to the goal of adding collections space, it is a stopgap solution. Ideally, he said, there will be further discussion of expanding the footprint at the main facility and adding at least 10,000 square feet dedicated solely to housing collections. Evans said that he believes the same amount of energy that has been devoted to the museum's proposed Waynesboro, VA branch campus should be devoted to the idea of a museum expansion in Martinsville.

Dr. Tom Benzing suggested that it would be beneficial to the board to have a better understanding of how much space current collections occupy; how much space is left in the main campus for collections expansion; and how much space will be needed for expansion in the future. Dr. Kal Ivanov said that Research and Collections staff would pull that data together. Dr. Art Evans asked if that document could be prepared by the end of the year so that it could be discussed at the next quarterly board meeting; Ivanov said that staff would certainly try, although Dr. Arianna Kuhn will be doing fieldwork in Madagascar for a large portion of that time.

Dr. Melany Clark said that the majority of the Code of Virginia, as it pertains to VMNH, focuses on Research and Collections. She asked if that also includes education. Dr. Art Evans said that he considers both education and exhibits to be a part of the whole and are important for disseminating information about collections holdings.

Dr. Tom Benzing suggested that VMNH conduct a feasibility study regarding the proposed footprint expansion. Dr. Art Evans said the expansion is going to be tough sell given that collections are often unappreciated since they're seldom seen by the public. However, he said, there are good talking

points that can be used to boost enthusiasm for the project; natural history collections can help us to answer the questions we don't yet know to ask. When he first joined the board, Evans said, R&C was not on the board's front burner. Every board committee needs at least one person asking, "Where does Research and Collections fit into our goals?"

Dr. Art Evans asked museum staff how staffing in Research and Collections was progressing. Dr. Kal Ivanov explained that rather than hiring a curator to replace Dr. Nancy Moncrief following her retirement, the museum was instead trying to recruit a "Visiting Scholar" who would essentially be a post-doctoral candidate that would fulfill many of the responsibilities of curator for a period of two years. He added that there was initially talk of hiring a curator with a focus on AI or big data. Dr. Adam Pritchard said that the job posting was eventually amended so that it advertised for a more traditional curator but with a preference for those candidates with experience in more modern data-driven fields. Evans said that it might be a tough sell to recruit candidates with that level of broad, deep knowledge to work in Martinsville, since the city's infrastructure might not necessarily support their needs. Mark Buss suggested that staff look at how other organizations in the region handle recruitment.

Dr. Adam Pritchard said that he recently went to a national meeting of vertebrate paleontologists and that it was reassuring to hear the board discussing the importance of adding space for collections, since at most other museums and universities, it seems like staff are having to plead to keep their existing collections rather than even consider expansion. Some years earlier, Evans said, a consultant came to VMNH to offer his advice on how the museum should move forward. When Evans checked the institutions the consultant mentioned he had assisted, he found out that they had all gotten rid of their curators and collections. Fortunately, Evans said, the mandate from the Commonwealth is that VMNH focus on Research and Collections and creating exhibits to promote the department.

Dr. Tom Benzing asked if there was any opportunity for prospective staff members to interact one-on-one with members of the Board of Trustees. Dr. Kal Ivanov and Dr. Adam Pritchard said that it hasn't really come up, although candidates are told that the board supports Research and Collections. Ivanov added that VMNH has no issue attracting quality candidates who seldom leave unless motivated by outside factors. In the next strategic plan, he said, VMNH is going to request another full-time employee from the state, although it's not yet clear at this time what position will be advertised. Ivanov said that another invertebrate paleontologist would be helpful. Pritchard added that invertebrate paleontologists tend to have a heavy background in geology, which would be useful for the museum's geology collections.

Mark Buss asked if it would be useful to add a preparator to the museum's operations and allow the position to be a shared resource with another museum. Dr. Kal Ivanov said that good preparators are few and far between, but a preparator would be an asset to the museum as they would be able to complete a couple of mothballed projects and create new exhibit items. Dr. Art Evans said that the position would allow for more cross-pollination between departments. While he generally doesn't like the idea of monetizing collections, a good preparator could be a way of meeting mission while also creating replicas of unusual specimens that could be sold or distributed to other museums. Ivanov said that the role could also incorporate 3D printing. Dr. Adam Pritchard said that 3D printing has become the standard over the more old-fashioned methods of molding and casting. Dr. Clark said that she could help explain to the Foundation Board the importance of adding this position.

Dr. Kal Ivanov took a moment to recognize Dr. Jackson Means, who was promoted to Assistant Curator of Myriapodology recently.

Dr. Art Evans thanked everyone for their participation and adjourned the meeting.

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