

Board of Trustees Quarterly Meeting
Saturday, November 15, 2025
Virginia Museum of Natural History
Walker Lecture Hall with remote participation option



The Virginia Museum of Natural History Board of Trustees held their quarterly meeting at 10 AM on Saturday, November 15, 2025.

Trustees Present:	Dr. Melany Clark (Chair) Dr. Carole Nash Dr. Tom Benzing Mr. Nathan Sanford	Dr. Art Evans Mr. Will Clements Ms. Sarah Bowman Ms. Ambria Wood (OAG Rep)
Staff Present:	Dr. Maddie Bassett Mr. Jonathan Martin Dr. Kal Ivanov	Mr. Ryan Barber Mr. Ben Williams Dr. Joe Keiper (Executive Director)
Trustees Remote:	Dr. David Furth (Distance) Ms. Elizabeth Carter-Bailey (Foundation Liaison)	Dr. Mindy VanDevelder (Distance)
Absent:	Ms. Lisa Carter Ms. Lauren Hall	Ms. Cathy Hincker Ms. Emma Ito

WELCOME AND CALL TO ORDER

Dr. Melany Clark opened the meeting and welcomed everyone at 10:04 AM and determined that a quorum was not present.

MINUTES

August minutes to be considered for approval at the next Board of Trustees meeting.

CHAIR'S REPORT

Dr. Maddie Bassett was introduced as the staff spotlight and spoke about her work at the museum. At the museum Dr. Bassett manages archeology collections, builds out the museum's reference collection, generates archelogy data, and conducts research. She is also involved in key projects for the Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab. Her local work most recently includes research on 179 sites in the Dan River drainage area which will be published in the coming months.

Mr. Barber provided a "deep dive" about the transformational gift from Mr. Frank Mariels. The total amount received was over 4.5 million dollars bringing the endowment total to 5.7 million dollars. The foundation has agreed to use the initial interest income to focus on the Young Explorers Center and Petra exhibit. Meanwhile, other endowment funds continue to grow and additional estate gifts are expected soon.

Mr. Barber urged all to remember that these funds were donated exclusively to the foundation and are being used as seed money. A priority is to continue to submit grants, cultivate memberships, and pursue other avenues to grow the endowment.

As a result of Mr. Mariels' transformational gift, one of the first items to be developed is a Young Explorers Center. Ms. Jennifer Whitlow shared some preliminary planning of the Young Explorer Center. Potential elements were shown, and the board was encouraged to submit any additional insight to staff for consideration. There was brief discussion about connecting elements in the Young Explorer Center to the museum either through play elements or with murals. It was noted that the exhibits manager may need to be included in an Ex Officio capacity on the Education/Exhibits Committee. Dr. Keiper added that the museum plans to request an additional staff member from the state to support the YEC following completion of the room.

Dr. Clark urged the Board to nominate anyone they feel would be an asset as a member of the Board of Trustees. There are still two vacant seats.

Dr. Clark thanked staff and Ms. Lisa Carter for their ongoing work requesting additional funds to support staff retention efforts. Dr. Keiper cautioned that while the state budget is flush at this time, the agency must remain cognizant of changes in the economy.

CONSENT AGENDA

The items listed on the consent agenda will be considered at the next meeting of the Board of Trustees. Dr. Keiper noted the museum will assess next steps for the Waynesboro project with the release of the Governor's budget in December.

RESEARCH AND COLLECTIONS

Dr. Art Evans reported for the R&C Committee that interviews for a new herpetologist are underway. The goal is to have the position filled by the summer. Additionally, the renovation of Douglas Ave. to provide storage is progressing. Dr. Evans reported that looking forward, staff would like to have a dedicated field vehicle that can travel off road with plenty of clearance.

EDUCATION

Mr. Nathan Sanford reported for the Education Committee that the pavilion has been used numerous times for educational experiences. He also noted that the Education staff participated in numerous events including the most recent Bonez and Booz festival. Staff continue to find creative solutions to challenges and expand their offerings to accommodate demand.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Dr. Keiper encouraged the Board to consider how each member can contribute to the mission through committee work. A list of committee descriptions will be emailed to each board member.

The museum's contribution to the VA 250 celebration will begin in January with an exhibit and interpretive signage throughout the museum. A membership event will be held on February 19th which will include a sample of Jefferson's corn beer and other natural history highlights from Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

The Natural History of Chocolate event was a success and well received. The museum was able to offer the event at \$100 a ticket due to the caterer donating her time and expertise.

The museum's annual "gala" event is scheduled for March 21st with a Bridgerton-inspired theme.

The mobile museum trailer is currently undergoing extensive evaluation with Spevco, a professional trailer company in North Carolina. Spevco will provide the museum with a cost estimate to renovate the inside, address the electrical issues, and wrap the outside, then move it back to Waynesboro for stationary use. The museum will continue to operate the trailer during farmers market hours, and festivals. Depending on the cost of the renovation the hope is to have the trailer operational and back in Waynesboro in May. Dr. Benzing noted the annual River festival is May 3rd.

ADVANCEMENT REPORT

Mr. Ryan Barber presented the Advancement Report for the quarter. Memberships continue to grow and there seems to be greater awareness of the museum and its offerings. Giving is strong and Museums for All participation remain steady.

Many of the museum's original exhibits have recently been repaired.

The museum received a \$10,000 grant from Virginia Tourism for use to promote VA250. One item funded by the grant, the *Virginia Explorer* publication is currently at the printer and will be distributed beginning in January. The museum also used a portion of the funds to order a new case in which to feature an original printing of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

Mr. Barber also noted appreciation of the recent partnership with the Taubman Museum in Roanoke.

Although there will be no adoption of the Strategic Plan at this meeting, Dr. Keiper encouraged the Board to review the museum's mission alignment with each objective.

The museum is exploring the possibility of obtaining Trilobite specimens and/or 3D prints for the special exhibit gallery. Based on the success of the exhibit, we may want to offer this as a traveling/rental opportunity. After discussion, several board members suggested having a trilobite naming contest.

Finally, Dr. Keiper informed the Board that the museum is currently talking with an industrial engineer and Southern Methodist University about temporarily securing their interactive 3-D printed hadrosaur skull. The skull is anatomically correct and includes technology which allows a guest to blow on a microphone and hear what the hadrosaur may have sounded like. Currently, the museum is negotiating borrowing this skull and technology at no cost.

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND OPEN DISCUSSION

Dr. Benzing expressed appreciation for the interpretive signage installed in Waynesboro along the South River. The museum hopes to develop a few more signs with funds left over from the original grant.

Dr. Keiper highlighted two future objectives found in the Strategic Plan regarding professional input on a Starling Ave. wing and connections to Wilson Park.

ADJOURNMENT

Dr. Clark reminded all Board members to support the museum through membership and expressed appreciation for their attendance. She further suggested everyone take part in a Doodle Poll to gauge interest in a fully remote meeting in February. Dr. Clark adjourned the meeting at 11:23 AM.