**WAYNESBORO ADVOCACY COMMITTEE**

**VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY**

1 August 2023

Waynesboro Office of Economic Development

**Attendance:** Tom Benzing, Maggie Van Huss, Stephanie Duffy, Rebecca Sharp (Guest), Joe Keiper (VMNH), Jonathan Martin (VMNH)

**Virtual:** Mark Buss, Len Poulin, LeAnn Binger, Ryan Barber (VMNH), Mary Zell Galen (VMNH)

**Absent:** Carole Nash, Greg Hitchin, Faye Cooper

1. Welcome

Tom Benzing:

* Welcomed LeAnn Binger, a new committee member representing the VMNH Foundation Board

1. Approval of past meeting minutes

Tom Benzing:

* Motion made to approve minutes was made by Len Poulin, was seconded by Maggie Van Huss, and pass by a voice vote.

1. Status of Detailed Design
   1. Building and AARB

Joe Keiper:

* 100% schematic design completed for the building and exhibits, which serves as precursor for preliminary design. It will be presented to the Arts and Architectural Review Board (AARB) in Richmond on Friday by architects and VMNH staff. The Board will receive an update next week on AARB presentation.
  1. Exhibit meetings

Joe Keiper:

* VMNH has held both formal and informal exhibit planning meetings with various stakeholders. While there is a pause on project work because of delayed funding, planning work continues with content experts.
* Tom Benzing: Exhibit design meeting on geology has had a strong conversation with stakeholders from Department of Energy, JMU, and Roanoke College. Good conversation about lobby exhibit featuring Crabtree Falls. Three more exhibit design planning meetings are scheduled.
  + Joe Keiper: Separate meetings will be held on geology, biology, ecology, animal behavior, and archaeology/ paleontology.
* Had recent conversation with John Ross about brook trout and want to tell similar stories to that one to add interest to the exhibits.
* Tom Benzing: Reminded that Carole Nash discussed human element in exhibits and would like to include those stories too. Also, reminded group about Crozet Tunnel story.

Len Poulin:

* How did field trip with Christine May go? Joe Keiper: Visited many areas throughout the region, including areas impacted by acid precipitation.

1. Funding Update
   1. Funding for Detailed Design

Joe Keiper:

* As an agency head and state employee, he works for the governor, but also must listen to the Board, which have differing priorities. Had meeting with governor and discussed levels of spending on spaces throughout state agencies. While it doesn’t impact Natural History, the governor wants to see a cohabitation of agencies to use resources wisely.
* Spoke with Greg Hitchin yesterday, and business owners in Waynesboro are willing to invest once project starts. He also suggested reaching out to Chmura to update the 2013 feasibility study of the project to have current return-on-investment numbers. As state employees, VMNH staff can’t carry this message to the state government. Need local government, stakeholders, and private citizens to ensure wants to community is known.
  1. State spending priorities and timeline

Joe Keiper:

* The governor will propose an annual budget, and House/ Senate will create own budget, and then they will be merged. If this specific project doesn’t make the governor’s biennium budget, the project will be delayed for four-six years.
  1. Messaging and strategy

Tom Benzing on timeline:

* As the Waynesboro advocacy committee, it is our role to advocate. It’s best to get it into the governor’s budget to begin with it.
* Len Poulin: Can we build an action plan? What’s our timeline? When does it need to be shared with the community? Tom Benzing: Governor typically releases budget in mid-December, and we will need to be in the budget offices by early September. Jonathan Martin: The budget goes from budget analyst to governor’s office in early August. It used to be due in October, but it was moved up by four months. Decisions will be made in the next two months.

Len Poulin on messaging:

* Governor has probably identified how much money he wants in reserves, and VMNH needs to create a message that the governor would identify with, like revenue and ROI. Need to have hard number assessing economic impact.

LeAnn Binger on advocacy:

* Requested background of advocacy so far. Tom Benzing: Have a long-standing relationship with Sen. Emmet Hanger. He has been in touch with Del. Chris Runion.
  + Joe Keiper: VMNH needs to reach out to Del. Avoli and Sen. Campbell to update them.
  + Len Poulin: All of our main advocates are retiring and we need to make new connections.
* Joe Keiper: Over the years, have submitted to legislative body on studies and planning studies completed throughout the project. As a technical observation, projects that have specific purpose get reduced to single phrase which inaccurately states what the project is. The group needs to talk about the economic development message.

Joe Keiper on economic impact:

* With action plan, Greg Hitchin is working with Chmura. He also needs to determine what the city message will be. The BOT should also come up with statement to reinforce the commitment to this project, as VMNH is about to take over a property to manage, but don’t have a building to put on it.
  + Tom Benzing: At Board meeting next week, he can recommend the Board of Trustees makes a statement about necessity of project.

Tom Benzing on marketing:

* Suggested drafting letter to share with the public and encourage individuals to send a message to their representatives.
  + Len Poulin: Thinks WAC should have a message with the media so all local news stories pick up on it, including calling a press conference. Then, have citizen groups reaching out to the government. Could potentially have a Change.org petition.
  + Joe Keiper: Confirmed with Zach Ryder if Board calls a press conference, would he be able to organize it by targeting regional news outlets. Could move forward with a press conference if that’s the will of the board.

LeAnn Binger:

* Asked how far along design was? Museum staff walked through current design renderings.
* Joe Keiper: The fact that VMNH was approved for $1.4 million but given $750,000, is concerning. Wants to speak with other museum agencies that were given partial detailed design funding. The legislation is there requiring funding the project.

1. Discussion on Branch Campus Committee

Joe Keiper:

* Have talked about the idea of having a branch campus committee with regional citizens who will participate in both capital campaign down the road and serve as arm for local fundraising.

Len Poulin:

* Term limited on the Foundation and is thinking forward. Want to plan what Foundation Board will look like in Waynesboro once construction begins.
* Brought Len Dorian to VMNH, who has been involved in museums and private schools for years. He’s highly interested in supporting the project.
  + Joe Keiper: VMNH staff is setting up a meeting with him soon.
* Asked what committee would look like? Joe Keiper: two statewide members and seven local members with regional knowledge.

Tom Benzing:

* Has the Foundation board been approached about setting up the committee? Ryan Barber: There is an MOU in place with relationship between Waynesboro project and VMNH signed in 2019, but VMNH can update it.
* Requested to bring up topic at the next Foundation meeting.

1. Community Connections
   1. Kline’s Dairy Bar Anniversary Celebration

* Tom Benzing: Good turnout at event, and large portion of people have heard about the project.
  1. Waynesboro Public Library
* Tom Benzing: Did not hold event in July, but had a good turn out in June. Will hold next session in August.
  1. Lecture Series
* Tom Benzing: Series will resume in the fall, and first speaker will be from the Augusta Bird Club about the Axton Hawk Watch. Usually have good attendance and stream live on Facebook.
  1. South River Watershed Collation
* Tom Benzing: Group is renewed version of the South River Science Team. Group will be putting museum logo on their office window and museum is welcomed to use space.
  1. Charlottesville Newcomers
* Joe Keiper: Will be presenting a museum progress update this fall.
  1. DAR
* Joe Keiper: Will be presenting in March 2024 with Len about project updates.
  1. Chamber of Commerce

Joe Keiper: Suggestion from Hal Aaslestad and will be presenting in upcoming months.

1. Open Discussion

Tom Benzing:

* Is there an opportunity to go in front of the City Council again? Joe Keiper: can work with Greg about it. Len Poulin: Suggests having committee members presenting and include study from Chmura. Maggie Van Huss: Suggested making presentation in September and requested to attend.
  + Stephanie Duffy: Confirmed Greg Hitchin reached out to Chmura but has not heard back yet.

Maggie Van Huss:

* Is it time to present to other local organizations like Rotary again? Len Poulin: Will present once we have our specific call to action.

Maggie Van Huss:

* When do we want position statement? Joe Keiper: Greg Hitchin is working on position paper for local legislators. VMNH will be working on one for local citizens. Len: people in the community don’t believe in spending money on the project, so need to stress the economic impact info for the presentation.

Joe Keiper:

* Requested large map used in tourist information booth to use in the museum.

1. Adjourn