



City of Arts & Innovation

Metropolitan Museum Board

TO: METROPOLITAN MUSEUM BOARD **DATE: OCTOBER 11, 2017**
FROM: MUSEUM & CULTURAL AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT
SUBJECT: UPDATE ON LEADERSHIP VISIT TO THE MISSOURI HISTORY MUSEUM

ISSUE:

Receive update on the leadership visit to the Missouri History Museum.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Board receive an update on the city's leadership visit to the Missouri History Museum.

BACKGROUND:

In 2016, the Riverside Metropolitan Museum (Museum) was reviewed by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) for reaccreditation. According to AAM, "accreditation offers high-profile, peer-based validation of your museum's operations and impact. Accreditation increases your museum's credibility and value to funders, policy makers, insurers, community and peers. Accreditation is a powerful tool to leverage change and facilitates loans between institutions".

After conducting their review process, AAM elected to table its decision for accrediting our Museum, and notified us on November 1, 2016.

That the Museum failed the extensive re-accreditation review was a clear signal that we had serious problems to address.

DISCUSSION:

After reviewing the AAM report, this administration realized that to change the Museum would require leadership acknowledgment of how serious the problems truly are. Hence, we elected to survey another museum, one with a great reputation and one that had also turned itself around. Making best practices trips is not uncommon for this City, or most Cities. We have taken trips to survey best practices for "One-Stop-Shops", libraries, cultural affairs departments, innovation districts, transportation systems, housing programs, homeless services, historic preservation, convention centers, and so on, to cities such as Pasadena, Austin, Orlando, Tucson, Phoenix, Tempe, and Syracuse.

In July 2017, we went to visit the Missouri History Museum (MHM) in St. Louis, Missouri. The leadership team for this trip was the Mayor, Councilmember Gardner, Museum Board Vice Chair Hughes, Riverside Museum Associates President Barnhart, the City Manager, and the Assistant

City Manager (Councilmember Gardner had to cancel due to family needs). The cost of the trip totaled \$3,992.25, of which \$1,596.90 was paid out of the museum budget.

The visit was from July 5 to July 7, 2017. We were hosted by the executive team of the MHM. They held a meeting with us to discuss their museum's history, turn around, expansion, operations, and overall philosophy about how best to be a relevant, impactful local history museum. They provided tours of two exhibits as well as the museum building, and we visited their collections facility to view their collections management in action.

WHAT WE LEARNED:

"Our staff has really been looking at the trends in museums and listening to visitors to understand what people want to see in exhibitions," -- Dr. Frances Levine, president of the Missouri History Museum.

"Most museums rely on one big exhibit, often a traveling show, to get big numbers and then go back to business as usual. They see a huge fall in the numbers the next year. We have turned this practice on its head by making a commitment to tell more local stories, display more of our collection, and do it all in new and compelling ways. That philosophy is paying off with consistently high attendance numbers." -- Dr. Jody Sowell, director of exhibitions and research.

The above quotes are from the American Association of State and Local History's January 05, 2017 article *Missouri History Museum Breaks Attendance Records Thanks to New Approach*. The statements reflect current best practices, and identify the essence of what Riverside Metropolitan Museum has not been doing – staying in touch with our community and utilizing our collections to tell local stories in imaginative, compelling ways.

The Missouri History Museum provided reminders of what museum basics are, and some inspirational ideas for what is possible when you have the basics taken care of. MHM is:

1. Organized
2. Has strong leadership in its management and board
3. Has professional staff capable of implementing its mission
4. Actively manages its collections
5. Is connected to the communities of St. Louis
6. Is imaginative
7. Evaluates its performance
8. Is consistent

Their recent Civil Rights exhibit embodies these attributes. They spent approximately two years planning the exhibit and are displaying it for 13 months. The attached MHM exhibit planning document illustrates how the exhibit was developed. A few highlights include:

1. Community engagement to inform the exhibit. In the outreach letter from the Museum President, she states "We are forming an advisory committee to help us plan, produce, and promote this important new exhibit . . . We will meet as a group five or six times over the next year to discuss plans for the exhibit, to read and comment on labels, to review design, to help create a communications plan, and to brainstorm ways to continue the discussion once the exhibit has opened."
2. The exhibit's plan included setting goals for "visitor outcomes."
3. The exhibit utilized the museum's rich local history collections.

4. The exhibit included utilizing local artists and performers to help tell the stories. Local artists painted portraits and images of various sizes for storytelling. And local actors gave live performances of historic speeches and other events inside the exhibit.



Live performance at MHM #1 in Civil Rights exhibit

5. They perform evaluations, including an opening day report and a one-month-in report.
6. In addition to traditional artifacts, the exhibit utilized wall-size light boxes to project large, changeable images; audio displays, video displays, interactive digital displays, artwork, and live performances, all adding to a robust, vibrant, relevant, engaging exhibition.



MHM Displays in #1 in Civil Rights exhibit

Now, by comparison, we look at RMM's most recent exhibit on local history, *First Things First*:

1. Exhibit planning document – none.
2. Community engagement for planning – none.
3. Interactive elements – none.
4. Visitor experience goals – none.
5. Community outreach for attendance – none.
6. Exhibit evaluation – none.

The exhibit's only document is a one-page budget sheet (attachment 2).



RMM Exhibit Displays in "First Things First"

So why do we take such best practices trips to other cities? To see what is possible *and* achievable. Because staying inside our bubble can at times get foggy. When most people think that our exhibits are good while in reality we are far behind the times, it's necessary and often enlightening to see what other communities are actually doing.

Could we have looked at the MHM online? Yes, and we did, along with many other museums. However, we make best practices visits as mentioned above to not only see them in action, but to also discuss with the practitioners about their achievements. And, especially in the case of museums, it has to be experienced in person.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

City Manager John Russo

I asked the Mayor, Councilmember Gardner, Ms. Barnhart, and Ms. Hughes to make the quick trip to St. Louis because I wanted the group to see a successful local history museum “turnaround”.

I had lived in St. Louis in the 1980s and had visited the Missouri Historical Society (MHS) museum at that time. As with the RMM today, the MHS was, at that time, stagnant in its exhibits and very poorly attended. This stood in stark contrast to the popularity of the St. Louis Art Museum which, like the MHS, was situated in Forest Park. Again, this is a similar dynamic to the lack of attendance at RMM while very nearby an art museum is drawing excellent attendance with dynamic and changing exhibits.

Earlier this spring, I had occasion to attend the American Association of Museums’ Annual Conference in St. Louis. The AAM Conference’s welcoming reception was held at the MHM and I was impressed by the changes to the Museum. A large modern addition had been appended to the original late 19th Century building in a manner both respectful of the original structure and functional for a 21st Century history museum. More importantly to our future, the exhibits were brilliant: video screens, live actors, interactive and tactile exhibits, motion detection, sound, hyperlinks, and more -- all worked together to tell important stories about national cultural trends using the local lens of St. Louis artifacts and personal narratives. The two exhibits — each of which were slated for display for 12-14 months — taught visitors about the rise of the Post WW 2 automobile culture and the evolution of the Civil Rights Movement. I was intrigued that these lessons were made vivid and material to the visitors through photos and things familiar to people in St. Louis, thereby making the broader national implications of these trends real to the individual visiting the museum.

Upon my return from the AAM, I immediately began planning to bring our local museum leaders to see what I had seen. I wanted to show how an up to date museum uses a multiplicity of methods to teach rather than the exhausted and discredited “Authoritative Curatorial Voice” instructing people from “above” that is predominant at the RMM. I also wanted to show how exhibits can successfully honor Riverside while making broader societal connections. Finally, I wanted to show an example of how a beautiful historic building could be preserved, reused and expanded into a more visitor friendly museum space. Based upon their comments, I believe that Mayor Bailey, Ms. Barnhart, Mr. Nguyen and Ms. Hughes felt there were many important takeaways from this short and busy trip that we can now apply to our RMM in order to make RMM an institution that includes ALL of Riverside’s residents and engages visitors to tell the story of our city and our region.

Peggy Barnhart **Riverside Museum Associates President**

My most “stand out” impressions as a result of our visit and tour of the Missouri history museum in St. Louis are as follows -

Architecture: The genius of the design for the expansion of the main building. Rather than attempt to “match” the existing building, the architect chose to use steel and glass. The visitor sees through the expansion, understanding that it is there, but actually ignores it as an add-on.

Attitude: Beginning with the Director, President Frances Levine, and including her executive staff, the curators, all employees and volunteers, there is a sense of pride, respect and team attitude that prevails. They “own” the museum. It was invigorating and contagious.

Visitor’s experience: St. Louis history is presented throughout the museum using several technics to appeal to all age groups from the youngest visitor to the senior visitors. A large selection of educational opportunities are offered throughout the month for these age groups.

Innovative ways to involve the community in the planning, implementing and presentation of the featured exhibits: Using local artists, historians, college students, drama department at the local university and businesses.

Gift shop on-line: Books and Historical Prints are listed and offered on-line for purchase.

Restaurant: A lovely dining room is open to the public for lunch and dinner. The facility is available for special museum events and for the public to rent for special occasions.

Special events: One of my favorites was Twilight Tuesdays. Guests bring a blanket or towel and a picnic dinner to the park (which is the setting surrounding the museum). A program of some kind is offered, maybe a musician, children’s drama club, poetry reading, etc. This was free to the public, but they have decided to charge maybe \$5 per guest. Not because they need the money, but rather for crowd control. The June attendance was nearly 10,000 people. The neighbors complained about traffic and parking. There is so much more to talk about that cannot be learned on Google. It must be experienced firsthand, to be really appreciated.

Mary Hughes
Museum Board Vice-Chair

The Missouri History Museum is a fine example of a turnaround success. It was a small local museum, somewhat neglected and under attended and, through smart fundraising and partnerships, evolved into a thriving relevant museum that attracts hundreds of visitors daily.

One could feel the energy when entering. We were greeted by a volunteer and given directions to different galleries. Additionally, kiosks for visitors to sign in were located near the entrance. Gallery spaces were well thought out, and were well utilized with movable walls and floating panels. The two exhibits we saw, *Route 66*, and *#1 In Civil Rights*, were both well designed and integrated the national big picture with emphasis on local history. One could tell there is a clear focus on the visitor experience.

The open spaces were inviting and I was particularly impressed by the number of people milling about. I watched families with small children sitting and chatting, and a members’ continental breakfast and lecture taking place in the vast atrium space.

From the minute you walked in the door, one could tell this was a very special place that everyone came to enjoy.

Mayor Rusty Bailey

The St. Louis museum trip provided us with a vision for the potential of our Metropolitan Museum. It provided us several relevant examples for change and growth both in the near and the long term - specifically museum expansion (and closure), archival process and treatment, and exhibit display and timing. And it motivated us to make decisions today that will positively

impact our museum for future generations of Riversiders.

The St. Louis Museum was at a crossroads when leadership stepped up and decided to expand the museum. Both city leadership and museum board saw virtue in protecting their current collections, but also expanding their reach to connect to a younger audience (large student populations at the grade school and university levels). This included raising the money to build adjacent to and appropriately connect to their historic building and site. This expansion motivated the board and public to give and to become members of the new museum and its "team."

As a part of the expansion of the museum, the leadership worked with the city to find public space in an underutilized city facility to appropriately process their museum artifacts and archive them (off site from main museum). The off-site operation allowed staff to focus their attention on this function and allow researchers to participate and access materials, including a user friendly database. The space was open and well-lit and offered the ability for interns to work with the professionals in a meaningful and "un-cramped" way.

The exhibits we experienced drew in their audiences through interactive elements as well as personal reflection. Not only did they create opportunities to touch and feel and "play" with items in the exhibit, they asked questions and encouraged responses through oral history and written formats (chalkboard and sticky notes). These responses became part of the exhibit and thus encouraged reflection and sharing toward personal connection and thus future support of the museum through giving and volunteering. I also became aware of the industry standards for planning and keeping exhibits open - at least two years to plan with a maximum of 18 months in use. Ensuring that exhibits were fresh and relevant and interactive keep people engaged and wanting to come back to the Museum and bring their friends, kids and visitors from out of town. And this helps with museum membership and fundraising.

Thus, I learned a lot about museum operations and funding and governance. I would say that this trip was one of the most educational and valuable I have been a part of since becoming mayor - especially due to the timing of the visit in relation to the decision making process we are going through as a city toward reinventing our Metropolitan Museum.

FISCAL IMPACT:

Cost per person: \$798.45

Trip Total: \$3,992.25

Mayor	Mayor's Office budget	\$ 798.45
City Manager Assistant City Manager	City Manager's Office budget	\$1,596.90
Museum Vice-Chair RMA President	Museum department budget	\$1,596.90

Approved by: Alexander T. Nguyen, Assistant City Manager/Acting Museum Director

Attachments:

1. Missouri History Museum Exhibit Planning Document
2. Riverside Metropolitan Museum Exhibit Budget Sheet