

Minutes
Frontier Culture Museum Board of Trustees Meeting
April 15, 2011 9:00 a.m. - Lecture Hall

Members Attending:

T.E. Beck Jr., Richard Bell, Michael DiGrassie, George Dygert, Emmett W. Hanger Jr., Ophie Kier, Gabrielle Lanier, Frank McDonough, Lynn Mitchell, Thomas Sheets, William F. Sibert, Emmett Toms, Paul P. Vames

Members Absent

Nwachukwu Anakwenze, William Card, Benjamin Cline, Pamela Fox, Edward Houck, R. Steven Landes, Scott MacMillan, Kenneth Plum, W. Roscoe Reynolds, Rhodes Ritenour, Beverly Sherwood, Cheryl Talley

Guests Attending:

American Frontier Culture Foundation President Maricia Capps, and Foundation Members William Bowman, Ronald Capps, John B. Dod, Robert Fonger, Cathy McNair, Dorothy Nelson, James Russell, Norman Smiley, and other guests Andrea Oakes, Staunton City Council, Debbie Fordham, Museum Volunteer, Maria Longley of the Staunton News Leader and Bob Stuart of the Waynesboro News Virginian

Staff Attending:

G. John Avoli, Executive Director, Eric Bryan, Deputy Director, Lydia Volskis, Museum Operations Manager, Michael Sutton, Marketing Director, Donna Parker, Fiscal Director, Merritt Schoonover, Fiscal Technician Senior, Mark Gatewood, General Administrative Manager, Cliff Edwards, Facilities Manager.

CALL TO ORDER AND APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Trustees Chair Mr. Paul Vames called the meeting to order at 9:05 a.m. and asked each person to introduce him or herself. He presented framed resolutions to Trustees Members Mr. Thomas Sheets and Mr. Michael DiGrassie, thanking them for their many years of dedicated service to the Museum. Deputy Director Eric Bryan related some of Mr. DiGrassie's finest accomplishments while serving on the Board, and Executive Director John Avoli reminded the Board of Mr. Sheet's many contributions as well. Mr. Vames also thanked Mrs. Maricia Capps, President of the American Frontier Culture Foundation Board and her husband Mr. Ronald Capps, Foundation Board Member, for their many contributions to the Foundation and Museum. The Capp's are leaving the Foundation Board in June.

The minutes of the September 2010 Board of Trustees meeting were approved as submitted.

I. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Executive Director John Avoli welcomed everyone and thanked the American Frontier Culture Foundation for their support of the Museum. He especially noted their purchase of the much-needed new sound system for the Lecture Hall which was being tested during the meeting. He recognized Staunton City Council Member Andrea Oakes who was in attendance as well as Ms. Maria Longley, a reporter from the Staunton News Leader and Mr. Bob Stuart, a reporter from the Waynesboro News Virginian. He complimented the Museum staff for their hard work during recent tough economic times for the Museum, and thanked outgoing Foundation President Mrs. Maricia Capps for her tireless service, as well as other outgoing Foundation Members Mr. Ron Capps and Mr. Michael Tusing.

He reported that the Museum is thriving in spite of tough financial times and some difficult state budgetary and technological issues beyond the Museum's control. In news since the September 2010 meeting:

- The West African (Igbo) site dedication hosted more than 2500 guests from all over the world and was a great success
- The Golf Tournament, Fortune-Williams Music Festival, Oktoberfest and the visit from the Hordt villagers all were positive events; the Staunton City School Board attended the BBQ dinner for the Hordt visitors and went into session to approve a student exchange program. The program was initiated last summer by the visit of Nik Fischer, a student from Hordt who stayed with a host family in Staunton and worked at the Museum; next summer a Staunton youth will visit Hordt as an educational and cultural exchange. It is hoped that plans for student exchanges with England and Ireland can be developed from the same model.
- Museum attendance is up 6% for the fiscal year over last fiscal year, which is impressive compared to statistics from other Museums. There was also record attendance at last fall's Creepy Tales tours and at the Holiday Lantern Tours.
- Site preparation is underway for the Native American exhibit. The ground has been cleared and the building team is ready to locate and cut saplings for the structures; the exhibit should be substantially finished by late Fall barring any unexpected complications.
- The Museum has received extra general funds from the state in the amount of \$500,000; Mr. Avoli and senior staff will learn how the money may be spent and if it may be used to pay the outstanding VITA bills, and purchase some long-needed equipment and supplies. Mr. Avoli thanked Governor McDonnell and the Legislative members of the Trustees board for their assistance in obtaining the extra funds under Budget Amendment #19. Work will begin soon on a legislative package and plan for submission to next year's General Assembly.
- The Museum's nearly 200 volunteers have been supporting the staff and adding plenty of work hours and personality to the site – Mr. Avoli extended his and the staff's appreciation to all the Museum's volunteers.

Mr. Vames also thanked the staff and volunteers and noted that they are led by a talented and devoted Executive Director; often even in down times people rally to consistently positive leadership and work more closely as a team.

Information Technology (IT)

Finance and IT Director Donna Parker reported on the current status of the Museum's technology and the outstanding VITA bill. The Museum will reduce the number of computers it uses associated with VITA to a bare minimum of 2-3, which will be in the Finance department and which will communicate with Richmond offices via a cell-phone tethered line. She reviewed a chart showing all items under the VITA contract including hardware, software, equipment and each of their costs to the Museum. The goal is to complete the reduction by the end of June at which point the Museum would pay about \$400 per month for VITA services as opposed to about \$10,000 a month.

Mr. Sheets asked about the new \$2,000 monthly charge recently added to the contract, and asked how the Museum would be able to reduce usage as it hopes when VITA keeps adding fees unexpectedly. She said it is possible that VITA would still be able to charge the Museum the full amount of \$10,000 a month even if the Museum reduces its number of computers to 2, as the VITA fees are not calculated based on what an agency uses, but rather on what VITA's income and cash-flow needs are. Numerous Board Members expressed frustration and incredulity at this seemingly arbitrary "black-hole" of fees and costs which allow the income needs of VITA, a large agency, to take precedence over the IT needs and slim financial resources of a small agency. Mr. Dygert asked for clarification about the new storage charge; Ms. Parker replied that the storage usage is not new, just that VITA has decided to charge for the storage.

After a question from Mr. McDonough about the origins of the Museum's computer equipment, Mr. Avoli described the history of VITA to the Board. He noted that while at its inception it may have seemed like a good idea, bureaucratic tangles, spiraling costs and lack of calibration for different sizes, budgets and agency needs have created a state-wide problem. He stated that other state Museums, universities and several others are exempt from VITA. Mr. Sibert asked about the sequence of reductions of computers and Ms. Parker stated that she would reduce the equipment ten items at a time to avoid having to file a "major revision ticket" with VITA service technicians which would create more delays and an extended approval process. She anticipates having no LAN servers owned by VITA. Mr. Beck asked what the total current outstanding bill for VITA is; Ms. Parker responded that it is about \$196,000.

Mr. Dygert asked how the agency's other computer needs will be handled after the VITA reduction. Ms. Parker responded that the American Frontier Culture Foundation, a 501C3 non-profit organization, is removing itself from the Museum's computer systems, and putting their own network into place. The Foundation will provide research stations around the Museum for other staff and the public who may need to use the computers for research or related Museum uses. Their connection to the internet will be via Comcast, and will cost a fraction of the cost of VITA service. Employees or others using these research stations will save their files and documents in external hard drives. Ms. Parker re-emphasized that all of the Museum's official state needs will be met by two computers and that the Visitor's Center will use two programmable cash registers, with purchase orders reverting to the older paper ledger system. Mr. Sibert complimented Mr. Avoli and the staff on remaining positive and finding some "old-fashioned" innovative solutions to current issues.

Mr. Sheets expressed the opinion that this is actually a step forward as a more efficient and less costly way to achieve the same results; Mr. Dygert concurred. Ms. Parker reviewed the expenditure plan for the remainder of the current fiscal year which ends June 30. She emphasized that unless there is a surprise, the Museum will end the fiscal year "in the black" with a small amount of funds remaining. This does not include the possible expense for the outstanding VITA bill. Ms. Parker reviewed the text of Budget Amendment #19 which states that the Museum will be given up to \$500,000 for payment of the VITA bill and possible other expenses; she reviewed a chart showing how the funds may be spent. There are several large items such as pre-fabricated restroom buildings for the New World sites, new maintenance scaffolding for safety, transportation and signage. She also noted that the Museum has never ended a fiscal year with a deficit, but instead over the past several lean budget cycles has amassed an equipment and repair deficit. This is due to items and equipment not being repaired or replaced as needed due to tight budgets and the need to retain staff rather than spend on equipment. She reiterated that these expenses are not an expansion of the Museum's holdings but replacement for items no longer useable. Mr. Dygert asked who would review and approve the plan the Museum is required to submit in order to receive the funds; Mr. Avoli responded that he and Ms. Parker would meet Department of Planning and Budget representatives in Richmond in a few weeks to review the plan and that the Secretary of Education would also review it. He noted that while the language of the amendment is clear, there are some procedures to be followed, and that nothing is guaranteed.

Mr. Vames asked for a motion from the Board in support of the plan Mr. Avoli and the staff develop. Mr. Beck made a motion, seconded by Mr. Sheets that the Board support the plan as developed, with one change added by Mr. Sibert. Mr. Sibert added that the excess \$41,000 be added to the transportation needs section, and that the Executive Committee will be kept apprised of any changes and of the outcome of the meeting to present the plan. Delegate Bell noted that he believed that the reviewers would either accept or reject the whole plan, rather than selecting some parts for approval and urged a careful review of financial totals and strong, carefully prepared explanatory and support documentation. Mr. Vames complimented Mr. Avoli on choosing to retain staff rather than spending on equipment over the past several lean years. Mr. Dygert noted that the tone of the spending proposal should also address and reflect how the Museum will use the funds to position itself in a positive manner for the future. Mr. Dygert called the question to a vote; there was no discussion and the motion passed unanimously.

Ms. Parker reviewed the expenditures report for the current fiscal year for staff, operating and capitol expenses. She explained some variants and special projects. She gave the current revenue report; revenue is up by over \$17,000 and visitation is up about 6% compared to the same time period last year. This is in spite of receiving no rent from the Travel Information center this year. Last year, the City of Staunton and other localities that operated the TIC on Museum property planned to eliminate it due to a budget crisis; the Museum chose to forgo the rent in order to keep the TIC open and retain valuable exposure and highway signage. The City continues to pay salaries for the several hourly employees who work there. Also, in December 2010, monthly revenue from the Sheetz station increased from \$7500 to \$8250. Mr. Sibert asked about the December 2010 apparent revenue decline; Ms. Parker responded that this was a temporary decline due to the final reimbursement to the Fortune-Williams Festival ticket processing in the Fall. She noted that she will make changes in the way the Festival funds are processed to avoid the appearance of decreased revenue in future reports. Senator Hanger asked if the Museum was happy with the services of the Payroll Service Bureau, which processes payroll and BES for the Museum. Ms. Parker responded that the Museum is very happy with the PSB's services, and spends only \$104 per W2 per year for the work.

Mark Gatewood reported that several projects have been completed with Maintenance Reserve funds; the parking lot has been re-striped, a dumpster pad has been constructed, the pole barn shingles have been repaired. He reviewed several possible projects for later this year.

Education and Interpretation

Deputy Director Eric Bryan reported on school group visitation target and actual numbers for Fall and Spring, and noted that a large Boy Scout event is planned for May. He reviewed the Foundation's Charles Fund grants and students served, as well as the factors that impact school group visitation during a normal year. These factors include the dates of Easter and Spring breaks, SOL testing and weather. He noted the Museum has set a goal of 25,000 students a year once the economy has improved and the new exhibits are open. The Museum has not presented many in-school outreaches this past year, mainly due to lack of available staff. Mike Sutton, Marketing Director noted that outreach programs may be best for middle and high school students who often cannot visit the Museum due to block scheduling issues. He also noted great teacher interest in the new Native American site, and reviewed the ways in which the Museum markets programs to teachers.

In May the Museum will host three days of teacher open house activities; teachers from around the state will be invited to visit the Museum free of charge and learn of options for classroom visits. Each will receive a portable flash drive with Museum information as a gift after the visit. Mr. Avoli noted that field trips at most educational and cultural venues around the state have been depressed in the past two years due to lean school district budgets.

Mr. Bryan reported that all of the Museum's educational programs support the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL's) and that new programs are always in development in response to new exhibits and to appeal to a wider range of school grade levels. Home School Day in October 2010 was a great success, and participants responded that they would like to visit the Museum again soon. The Museum will host a Colonial Artisans day on September 30, 2011 which may also attract many home-schooled groups. This is followed by Primitive technology Days on October 14-15 and the annual meeting of the Archaeological Society of Virginia at the Museum. October is Virginia archaeology month.

The West African/Igbo site survived the winter with minimal weather damage. Mr. Bryan reviewed slides of the exhibit dedication event in September 2010 and shared plans for the upcoming year. In addition to a number of special school and college class visits and programs, the site will host several Igbo gatherings later in the spring, summer and fall. These include the Enugu Festival on May 21, the New Yam Festival July 15-16, various work projects and a proposed Igbo Reconnection day in September.

Mr. Bryan reported that the American Indian exhibit preliminary site work is underway. In February and March of 2011 the Museum's annual Winter Lecture series focused on Native American themes and was the best attended series ever with over 550 people attending four programs. He outlined several possible courses of action the Museum may take in constructing the Native American exhibit and requested that the Trustees Board appoint an ad hoc committee (to include one Member from the Foundation Board of Directors) to assist in planning and to present a recommendation to the full Board at the September 2011 meeting. Mr. Vames asked for volunteers and Senator Hanger, Mr. Beck, Ms. Mitchell and Dr. Lanier agreed to participate on the ad hoc committee. Mr. Bryan thanked the volunteers and also requested that the Foundation Board appoint Dr. Clive Hallman to the Committee. He showed slides of possible layout plans for the exhibit and materials needed. Mr. Sheets was pleased that the exhibit plan had expanded from older versions in which only a small temporary dwelling had been planned; Mr. Bryan responded that he also felt that a larger, more fulsome exhibit was warranted to fully cover the information and place the site on par with the other exhibits.

Visitor Experience and Satisfaction

Mr. Bryan reported that 475 visitor report cards had been collected since the last Trustees meeting in September 2010, and that 99% rated the Museum as good or excellent. He noted however that only about 1.3% of visitors completed the report card.

Marketing

Marketing Director Mike Sutton gave an overview of FY 011:

- Museum visitation is up 6% over the same period last fiscal year
- The new Virtual Rabbit Museum tour implemented in Fall 2010 has hosted 8100 "hits" so far, with the west African site as the most popular feature
- The new orientation video is complete and is now being shown in the Visitors Center theater
- The new Museum website launched in early April and is updated regularly
- The Blues Festival, new in 2010 will return in August 2011 as will a revamped Wine Festival in June
- He will continue to spend marketing funds on electronic, print, TV and radio advertising as well as banners, and new site signage
- He reviewed a slide of a map depicting the locations of Museum visitors' homes and a slide of zip code locations for visiting school groups as well
- He reviewed the website hit statistics, noting that these numbers have remained constant over the past two years
- He previewed plans for the remainder of 2011 and for 2012; he will increase special TV ads, internet presence, teacher marketing and also allow funds for emerging opportunities

Delegate Bell suggested using this positive marketing report as a part of the presentation to state level officials in plans for the expenditure of the \$500,000.

III. REPORT FROM THE AMERICAN FRONTIER CULTURE FOUNDATION

Outgoing Foundation President Mrs. Maricia Capps thanked the Trustees board for their support during the past four years of her tenure, and complimented all on the progress and growth which has occurred at the Museum in spite of the difficult economic times. She also complimented the members of the Foundation's Board of Directors and Foundation staff for their dedication and hard work. She reviewed the work and responsibilities of each Foundation Committee. She reported that the annual fund had nearly reached its full annual goal by early April and that a very recent \$5,000 gift may help in reaching the goal early. She reminded the Trustees that the Foundation will soon be installing a number of research computer stations around the Museum for staff and public use. The Foundation will soon add one part-time person to manage information technology and some marketing duties. She urged all Board Members to be active in advocating for the Museum and thanked all attendees for their service.

Mr. Vames thanked Mrs. Capps for her many yeas of service on the Board of Directors and especially noted her leadership in accepting the development property from the state as well as maintaining excellent working relations between the state Board of Trustees and the American Frontier Culture's Board of Directors. Mr. Sibert also complimented Mrs. Capps and noted the hard work which accompanies many of the Foundation's fundraising events. He suggested that all Trustees become members of the Museum as a way to show support for their efforts.

IV. OLD BUSINESS

Mr. Avoli reported that the transfer documents for the old DeJarnette property from the state to the Foundation are at long last nearly complete. He also reported that Mr. Gordon Barlow and his associates from the AWASAW project are nearing completion of a financing deal to begin work on the project.

Mr. Vames thanked Senator Hanger, Delegate Bell and other Legislative members for their assistance in procuring the \$500,000 from the state for the Museum.

V. NEW BUSINESS

No items of new business were brought forward.

VI. NEXT MEETING DATE

The next meeting is set for Friday September 16, 2011 at 9 a.m. in the Lecture Hall of the Dairy Barn

VII. ADJOURNMENT

With no further business to discuss the meeting was adjourned at 11:45 a.m.