

Museum Assessment Program

Sample Community Engagement Assessment Report “Norse Museum” Little Scandinavia, Arkansas

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This sample report from the Museum Assessment Program is based on a real museum. The report is a good example of the challenges typical of many museums participating in the MAP program. All of the names of the staff, board members, museum, town, buildings, as well as the Surveyor, have been changed.

Why is this report a good report?

This report follows the new report writing guidelines and is a strong report because it showcases how a museum can look for new ways to reinvigorate its current niche audience and search for new ones. It focuses on how to work with and cultivate within a small to mid-size community base of support while remaining positive and upbeat. Its recommendations are clearly outlined, which will make it easier for the museum to a) locate them, b) organize them, and c) utilize them when seeking financial support.

Executive Summary

My observations and recommendations in this report are drawn from my two-day visit to the Norse Museum on June 12 and 13, 2025; my review of the self-study materials and institutional background prepared for my visit by the MAP Assessment Team.

The Norse Museum is well positioned as an institution to serve its very unique mission. The institution is well perceived by the community and enjoys a stable base of support and funding. The organization plays a lead role, not only interpreting the history of the Norse in Arkansas, but also as the chief repository of books, manuscripts, and documents related to the sect founder, Odin King and the records of the immigration of his followers to the area. Without question they are looked to as the principal center for scholarship and study. Long established as a research center and library, the institution, since moving to a new building in 2012, now seeks to better serve as a repository for the study, preservation, exhibition, and exploration of the material culture and objects of the declining Norse community and Little Scandinavia. At the same time the Norse Museum is evolving into a major repository of the physical remains of the religious sect; it should also recognize that the personal histories and stories of the individual members of the community need to be preserved to add context, meaning, and relevance to the objects deposited in their care for future generations.

The museum is well positioned to meet the challenges of the future. The small but talented professional staff is guided by a committed Board. Support from both the American Norse League and a Friends Group is stable and has the potential for growth. There is a reliance on annual giving to meet the current operating needs, but it is uncertain from year to year and may not be sustainable if they cannot broaden their base of support and grow membership lists among new constituencies. The surrounding region is changing from a rural agricultural base to light industry and suburban bedroom community. Though these changes are perceived as a negative, the region is economically viable and growing, not declining, which presents opportunities for program outreach and membership growth. Lastly, the Norse enjoys a positive relationship with other heritage and museum sites in the community and should reinforce and maintain their standing and role as a leadership organization. Allow me to recommend that the Norse Museum staff and Board, with key representatives from the American Norse League and Friends Organizations, together with community leaders and representatives from other heritage organizations work together to address the following:

- **Strategic Plan:** In order to meet best practices, the NM must make a true commitment to Strategic Planning. Drawing on past attempts is the best place to start fresh. Determine first what did not work and identify who should be represented in making the plan and then determine what goals would be appropriate and realistic based on the existing operating climate. Second, hold a series of retreats with key constituencies and record short-term projects and goals. Finally, create a Strategic Management team to collect the goals and determine priorities – as well as make the hard decisions on what is to be left out of the Plan and what to keep in play as a horizon project or opportunity project and future goal. Empower the Strategic Management Committee to regularly report, assess, and make changes and adjustments as needed to the adopted plan.

- **Marketing Plan:** Once the Strategic Management Committee determines that marketing and audience development is an institutional priority in the Strategic Plan, the institution should carefully craft a Marketing Plan, but only after first making a commitment to regular **visitor evaluations**. If you do not fully understand who the current users are, you cannot determine how to attract new audiences. The next step is to have a long range **exhibition and program calendar** developed as a team by the professional staff with support of the Board and the Strategic Management Committee. Then you must also determine a **geographic scope** for your marketing efforts, develop media relations and press contact lists, and set a budget for purchasing advertisements or broaden electronic media.
- **Volunteer Training:** Once the NM makes a commitment to growth, expanding outreach and developing new and diverse audiences, the institution must address weaknesses in volunteer training. There is a need to assure that visitors who are attending and participating will have engaging and enriched experiences once they get through the front door. A review of the self-study materials, conversations with the MAP Assessment team, and voices represented from the community clearly identified shortcomings in volunteer training that must be addressed.
- **Sharing Heritage with the next Generation:** During the course of my visit, I heard from many voices a low rumbling concern about dwindling numbers of league members and the role the remaining local Norse League centers are playing in community life. There were also concerns about the disintegration of rural farm life and spread of suburban sprawl. All these factors are impacting the NM because of the vast quantity and availability of material culture objects and to some extent papers and manuscripts that are being offered to the collections is a sign that the significance of the Norse in the community is being reduced. The institution needs to prepare for the day in the future when this non-league based museum and library is all that remains to preserve, share, and tell the rich history and contributions of the Norse. Building additional library and collections storage, taking on entire barn collections or examples of quilting, needlework, and paintings are only the practical needs of the future. The organization must continue to foster a generational transfer of heritage within families and especially between grandparents and grandchildren. In the process document the remaining stories and personal histories before they disappear.

Introduction

The NM is a very welcoming place. The Museum Director, Thor Hammer, and the MAP Assessment team facilitated a very comfortable schedule that allowed for private visits with the professional staff, members of the board, members of the American Norse League, Friends organization, business and community leaders, regional heritage groups, volunteers, and community supporters. Several informal sessions were carried out over lunch. A group dinner with the Board unfortunately did not take place on the first evening of my visit; however there was representation from the Board, including the current Chair at a lunch on Friday. The MAP Team arranged for a comfortable stay at a local B & B. With the free time available in schedule, I was able to tour the local community, assess current signage, inquire at two local restaurants about the institution, and drive around to assess the local business community – along Main Street and in the surrounding light industrial areas.

With each individual and group that I encountered during the site visit, it was very clear that the organization is viable and generally regarded in a positive light. All of the MAP Self-Study and preliminary materials accurately portrayed the institution.

Before I began with each person or group, I clearly explained the goals of the MAP Program and my role to assess and provide a written report that is to summarize my impressions and suggest ways for the museum to achieve the goals they set out to achieve. My role was as an observer and to only suggest ways to better develop audiences, identify weakness and strengths, and foster a commitment to sound best practices for moving forward.

It was very evident that the institution had a clear goal and outcome in mind for their participation in the MAP Program. Through the process they hoped to discover more about their existing audience and develop new audiences and determine the potential that new, perhaps younger audiences could bring. As for a measurable goal, they would like to see attendance up to 17,000 per year, most recently down around 11,000 from a high just after new construction opened in 2017 of 13,000.

A goal that was not stated at the outset, but had emerged in the MAP process was for the institution to discover that their mission was actually fractured into a multiple niche markets. In the years since the mission was adopted, the split between league history and regional history of the Arkansas Nordic community of Little Scandinavia has added to the staff workload. The small staff and limited budget was called on to serve everyone from genealogists, local history buffs, the Arkansas Nordic community, league members, scholars and researchers, two support groups; the American Norse League (620 members) and a Friends Organization (170 members), homeschoolers and traditional school tour groups, larger museums seeking loans from the extensive collections, local artists, and crafts persons.

Brief Institutional History

The mission of the Norse Museum is to collect, preserve, exhibit and interpret books, manuscripts and artifacts related to the Norse, the people of southeastern Arkansas in general and the Little Scandinavia in particular.

Adopted By the Board of Directors March 2019

(Edited from the NM website) In 1876 the General Conference of the Norse League instructed league trustees to collect books and manuscripts remaining in Norse possession. The driving force behind this collecting effort was based on two developments, one negative and one positive. The negative development was a declining knowledge of the Nordic language among Norse: this deprived them of the ability to study their own history. Designated the "Norse Historical Library" in 1880, Sam Loki was the collection's first curator. Loki, a teacher by training and profession, originally stored the newly gathered books and manuscripts at his home near the Ozarks Meeting House, but when he moved to Little Scandinavia in 1885 to take up teaching duties at the Scandinavian School, the collection moved with him: first to his home, then to the school's campus where it remained for the next fifty-nine years.

In 1912, the institution secured a matching grant from Large Donor for \$14,000 for a new library building. In the negotiations between Large Donor and other donors, it was agreed that "one purpose of the library building was to provide floor space and a fireproof section or vault for the housing, use and management of the collection of historical materials being formed by the Norse League." With contributions coming from school trustees, alumni, and league members, the money was raised and the new library building was dedicated in 1915. In 1952, the General Conference approved separate incorporation of the library and the land which would be owned by the corporation so that the library would be a "perpetually independent" institution. In 1955 articles of incorporation were approved and bylaws adopted. In 1959 the library's property was deeded from Scandinavian School to library. The location chosen was a lot on the Scandinavian School campus approximately 310 yards from the Donor Library.

The new building was dedicated in 1962. Earlier that year title to the collections, endowment funds, and rights of occupancy to designated areas of the Donor Library were formally transferred from the Board of Publication to the Norse Library. The contents of the vault had been moved and the rest of the library collection was moved as time permitted. The museum collection remained in the Donor building and was given over to exhibit space for the artifacts. Over the years this collection grew and more thought had to be given to consider suitable space for its storage, display, and protection.

In the 1980s a fire badly damaged the main building of the Scandinavian School. This prompted the Board to consider relocating the museum collection to a more secure, fireproof building. A capital campaign was started to raise money for an addition to the library for storage and exhibition of the museum collection.

Ground was broken in March 2015 and the building was completed and rededicated in June 2017. During the period of the construction the building was closed but the staff continued to work in the midst of the construction. The museum collection was

inventoried and boxed for moving and the library collection was boxed and stored off site. Since 2017, the rechristened, "Norse Museum" has opened its doors to researchers, students, and families interested in the Norse story or, more generally, Arkansas Nordic culture and life. The Museum's challenges for the future are still great: attracting visitors from a changing social demographic; creating new education and exhibit topics and programs; cataloging its large collection of books manuscripts and artifacts; locating funding for the operation and upkeep of the building, and the preservation and conservation of the collection.

Audiences and Community

The NM developed their new mission statement as a result of the consolidation of the research library and growing collections of objects coming together, once again, under one roof with the completion of the library building addition in 2012. The Board is to be applauded for not only reviewing the statement but for also recognizing the need to make a change so that the institution can speak to a larger purpose and better integrate study and research of a library organization with preservation and presentation of collections as a museum organization. The current mission statement also addresses the decline in the significance of the Norse as a religious sect and yet still recognizes their importance to regional history in a changing environment. The statement is concise and well suited for the organization. There is much evidence by the quality of both the library and the museum that the organization remains equally committed to both shared enterprises.

What is difficult to ascertain is how well they are meeting their mission stated goals since the organization currently does not use evaluations for programs and events, nor do they employ any regular visitor evaluation.

Since the institution does not charge an admission fee or depend on earned income from admissions to support operations, little assessment is conducted on how well they are serving their current audience. Aside from observation from volunteers and the recent evaluations conducted by the MAP Assessment team, there is little historical evidence to track visitation, establish visiting patterns, understand if visitors are local or travel from a distance or how visitors first heard about the NM. Therefore, there is no evaluation to track if visitors are responding to paid marketing in local newspapers or from the institution's membership in the local regional tourism and convention and visitors bureaus.

In terms of participation in programs, the museum has a better tracking mechanism; however program evaluations are rarely employed. Most participation appears to be drawn from the museum's own communications outreach: a quarterly printed and direct mailed newsletter. It should come as no surprise that the mailing list, which also forms the basis of the annual appeal list, has remained static and with that so has program participation over the years. Every program participant – especially first-time participants – only become audience when you capture addresses and emails and can communicate regularly so that they will return – hopefully with friends to introduce as new participants - so that they eventually become annual givers and regular supporters.

Whereas the institution does not rely on admissions income, the annual appeal is the life blood for the Norse and the prospect list must be constantly added to and updated. Increased gifts to annual appeal will be the greatest measure to the success of any

marketing and planning protocols that are put in place. The museum manages their donor and communications mailing lists on GenericMuseumSoftware. They also manage the separate mailing records for the American Norse League (about 400) and the Friends (about 100). The system was recently upgraded, but I was surprised that it does not allow for the gathering and managing of email addresses. This may be all right for now, since the museum donor base is very traditional and is responding well to the direct mail newsletters and annual giving appeals. However, to exploit a younger audience and for more immediate e-blasts and appeals, the museum should maintain and build an email database.

The institution should also maintain one master communication and donor list. For this reason the separate lists that seem to be assembling from the individual departments, education, library and the curator need to be brought into the master list. GenericMuseumSoftware should have the capability to assign source codes so that lists can be sorted by department to allow for separate mailings and the ability for each staff member to cultivate their own followers for gifts to the annual appeal.

Strategic Planning –

The NM needs to articulate what issues and audiences are important to the long-term health and sustainability through a Strategic Plan. The current planning device is a two-year road map – which is essentially nothing more than a work plan. The two-year outlook is based on what is currently being worked on by the staff with limited board oversight. The goals and objectives as stated are too varied and far from targeted. Having a plan that is honestly more strategic and realistically based on available staffing and volunteer support, as well as fiscal reach should help end the frustration that the organization is trying to do too many things, and a feeling that few things are actually getting done well. This is not a new issue. It was clearly raised in the earlier MAP report prepared by Fulla Gullveig in 2012. At that time the assessor commented that planning was “too general and over-reaching to be truly effective.” Through my observations and reading of the self-study materials it appears to remain the same today as it did in 2012.

There are many approaches to Strategic Planning. As the Director of a small historic house organization with a roughly similar staff structure (three professionals) and a \$610,000 annual operating budget, I have utilized planning for the past 20 years. Having a plan in place helps maintain our mission driven focus, eliminates “instant re-prioritization” by staff or the board to meet the current crisis, and provides for responsible stewardship for all aspects of the organization including financial resources, investments, physical plant, staffing, board development, and marketing and public profile. Attached to the report is a copy of the current Iceland House Strategic Plan. It was developed in-house without the use of a paid consultant. A Strategic Planning Committee composed of the professional staff and the executive committees of the Board oversaw the entire process of hosting a series of retreats, drafting and writing the plan. They are responsible for monitoring progress, annual review of the plan, and making necessary changes and adjustments as warranted over the five-year period.

Marketing Plan -

Attempts at putting together a Marketing Plan have been ambitious and never fully realized. Funding provided by the Greenland Foundation sought to implement some of

the recommendations of the MAP Assessment in terms of Strategic Planning and better define and develop audience through a Marketing Plan. The report provided by consultant Freya Valhalla from the Germanic Nonprofit Center in August 2012 outlined very good suggestions for moving forward in these areas, but again, there is little evidence that the institution ever acted on implementation. Once again, this assessor would recommend starting fresh with a review of the report prepared by Germanic and then by forming a working group consisting of the Director, Curator, Educator, and Archivist with a few key Board members and members of the local community who have knowledge of tourism and marketing. This work group should define realistic goals and set objectives that can be met. To ensure that progress is made toward implementation, the work group should adopt a full year-long calendar with set quarterly meeting dates at which time the plan is reviewed, modified, and assignments are made for the next reporting and implementation period. At Iceland House we also have developed two supplemental statements that drive our marketing and interpretation efforts. A Vision Statement amplifies our mission and serves as a marketing declaration. We restate our current interpretive themes in our Thematic Interpretation Statement that not only serves as a staff training tool but is used in our press releases and in our paid marketing. Copies of each are attached.

Defining Audience – School-Aged Children

The NM should not despair and wring its hands seeking to better serve the local school district. In fact, there are four adjoining school districts each having various issues and policies on field trips and teaching to different standards of learning. The education program should however reach out to the Scandinavian School, which adjoins the facility.

The Norse needs to first determine if it wants to be a major player teaching the fourth grade study of the Arkansas Nordic. If yes, then the resources – both financial and staffing – need to be identified, and an institutional-wide commitment needs to be made. The first step is to meet with Curriculum Committee Chairs from each of the surrounding counties and get to know the key decision makers. Even before the first student participates in a program, the Norse needs to develop curriculum-based materials and then test and market the product. The best method is to form a Teachers Committee who will review and help develop the materials. These teachers can also help be ambassadors back to the school districts. Once materials are developed the museum needs to host a series of in-service day teacher training workshops. For success in primary education you must become a key partner. Ask what is needed – then deliver. Then follow up.

Homeschoolers –

It is important to identify homeschoolers as a target audience and to keep building the list. Word of mouth is very important to this group. Keep in contact with persons who have created home school networks. Find and exploit more networks within a day's drive. Keep reminding homeschooled parents that you are here and ready to work with their curriculum needs – offer personalized experiences and share access to Curator and Library Staff.

Once captured, be sure to add to the email market base, and more importantly capture mailing address for newsletter and annual appeal. The Museum Educator should

personally put notes on homeschooler annual appeal letters. Suggest the minimum or any small gift.

Family Fun Night –

Determine if these are using resources wisely, and then, if these are worthwhile programs that benefit the overall Strategic mission. Like all programs there is an obligation to weigh potential costs with benefits. Once everyone comes to an agreement the institution needs to have the resources to make a regular commitment – one-offs are frustrating.

Public Perception

The MAP Community Engagement Self-Study revealed the greatest challenges to how the public experiences and perceives the resources the site has to offer. It was evident from the observations of the MAP Assessment team that problems exist with the volunteer staffing of the front desk. The reliance on older volunteers to be the first point of contact – and actually the only source of contact – is a detriment to all the positives the institution has to offer. Not turning on lights, or making eye contact with guests or giving a warm welcome to simple things like not explaining the tour route or turning on the orientation film can all be corrected with additional training. Volunteers want to be good at what they do especially older individuals who take great pride in their work. They need to be trained and told what the expectations are for them as representatives of the institution. They also need to be reminded and acknowledged for a job well done and corrected when they don't meet expectations. They need to engage visitors upon arrival and be sure to thank visitors as they are leaving and assist in giving directions or recommendation for a place to eat in the community and encourage guests to leave an address to join the mailing list or a secure an email address. If a volunteer is uncomfortable doing these simple hospitality steps, then they should seek another aspect of the museum operation to spend their time, and new volunteers should be recruited with the willingness and energy to devote to creating a welcoming environment.

The Norse needs to actively recruit volunteers willing to serve a hospitality function. A desire was expressed to have younger volunteers, but the main source of volunteer recruitment is through a Senior Service Organization. The newsletter could serve as a better source, just be sure to list the expectations clearly and be selective.

The use of paid students also appears to have its shortfalls and limitations as well, not because of their age, but because they are also not trained or perhaps not asked or instructed to be welcoming and helpful. With a paycheck comes an even greater obligation to better serve as the public face of the institution. Anyone, even a paid security guard, who barely looks up when someone enters and continues to sit behind a desk, is off putting and not how visitors should be welcomed.

In a general discussion with members of the community who were not members of the Friends or American Norse League, it was enlightening in that most felt that the institution did not seem to want to change since they see the same volunteers at the desk and the poor welcome is expected whenever they visit. One commented that in all the years of visiting and attending programs, they did not know that there was a film as they had never been asked to view the orientation.

Routine and repeat visitors respond well to the notices in the newsletter and see the changing exhibits and programs in the *Arkansas Express* and the *Scandinavian News*. One commented that the exhibits even change too frequently and she does not always get by to view them before they are taken down. The general participants also thought it would be nice to have a six-month calendar of upcoming lunch programs and lectures so they could plan on attending far in advance. Additionally there was the suggestion of having a regular Friday afternoon quilting class or some other month-long hands on crafting program. There is great potential for parent child programs, such as parent-child quilting or fishing, and even multi-generational grandparent programs.

There certainly are always challenges to reaching youth audiences and a community member suggested perhaps working with the local ministerium to develop confirmation service hour projects for students. This may have potential.

Physical Presence -

The façade of the old building is far from inviting and still has the Norse Library emblazoned in stone over the closed front entrance. In fact there is no visible pathway to what appears to be the prominent front entrance. The roadside signage on the front lawn is small and too wordy to be read while passing along in a car. The new exhibition highlight text is small and is behind old frosted glazing making it very hard read.

The general impression of the site is that it is well maintained, including the landscape and parking lot. One suggestion would be to perhaps move the flags to the front of the lot – not in the rear. Additionally, colorful street banners could help define the NM property from the Scandinavian School Campus.

The New Building is very well designed and the sympathetic architecture blends in very well with the older Library Building. The glass storefront is very inviting; however, the visitor's first impression is to see the backs of easels and display boards of the gift shop. It would be more visually appealing to turn some of the merchandise around to face out. Even hanging sample panels of the specialty made Norse quilt fabric or exhibit reproduction paintings would be more inviting from the parking area.

Another minor issue in public perception is that in spite of the inviting architectural finishes in the old and new building and the quality of the exhibits, there are dark and dead end spaces at the edges. There is one particularly uninviting space that leads to the restrooms on the ground floor that is dismal, another leads to a mechanical closet, and there is an abrupt void that leads to the curatorial prep and office space directly from the exhibit hall. Some attention should be paid to these areas to help improve visitor perception

Public Involvement

Overall the community perception of the Norse is positive. They enjoy the support of the local government and the Town officials seem to be receptive. It is hard to judge community impact in terms of their contribution to the local economy since visitation is so modest. The local community did rally to support and help when the building campaign was on and they were interested and excited by the new construction. There is

evidence of support from the local business community. Valhalla Furniture which has an operation in the region gave significant number of office and visitor furniture to the project.

However, people were excited when there was something new – now there seems to be a sense of retrenchment and that the staff is not getting out into the community. The Chamber of Commerce is active. I noted that they maintain good signage in the region. The business community is substantial with some national and international companies represented, but more importantly there are some good-sized independent companies and small businesses with 50 to 150 employees. The director – as well as the staff and Board members should make it a point to attend a fair number of community meetings sponsored through the Chamber and other organizations, and network. The staff should - Give-out and Get 5 -- business cards each time they venture to a community meeting. Since building support through the annual appeal is so critical they should then enter those addresses in the mailing list for the newsletter and email in a separate data base. This is a great low cost way to build communication base.

The Norse can and should improve the signage from the main state road. This will just cost the small amount for the new signs and the town will see that they get new signs installed. The location next to the more widely known Scandinavian School is both a benefit and a problem. Since there is no physical barrier between the two separate organizations it is easy for the general public to think that the school and the NM are the same entity. The fact that they shared a common past is only understood by the insiders. Any past feelings and bad blood between the institutions needs to be overcome, at least to find the means of maximizing the shared campus space. There is an opportunity to engage the parents of current students at the Scandinavian School and Alumni at the annual Parents and Alumni Weekend. In spite of the past history, this is a consistently changing audience and one that will help grow list of potential annual supporters. A commitment to at least get them through the door and capture their names, addresses and or email needs to be made. The proximity of the school with an enrollment of just about 300 students has great potential for education programs and volunteer service projects. The college prep curriculum and AP classes can also be mined for projects and class visits.

In regards to local media they are fortunate to have *The Arkansas Express* and another paper the *Scandinavian News* which are very receptive to their press releases and event postings. Like all things – the newspaper would like to see some paid ads a little more frequently. The NM should look to this as an inexpensive means of reaching out the local community beyond their only current source of direct communications which is the quarterly newsletter. Look into a coupon offer – four times per year – *bring in this coupon and receive a 10% discount to our gift shop which is filled with unique handcrafted gifts and local treasures.* Fill in name, address and email to redeem! Try it – see how many it brings in.

This is a very close-knit community, and within the support group, many are aware of the financial limitations on the organization and the limited time for the staff. That being said, the institution has to not let perception that limited resources and staff are holding them back from being an important part of the community.

The assessor understands the burden that hosting (that is charging nothing or a small fee for use) local community groups and business meetings has on the staff, but a

commitment needs to be made that these are important and that even if limited to a set number per month the space is available to the community. The new building provides opportunities for civic and community engagement, and even a new earned income stream through the rental of meeting space on the second floor. To do so without a burden being placed on the professional staff, the fees charged need to be raised to cover the costs of maintenance personnel for set-up, breakdown, and cleaning of the space. The benefits potentially gained by providing community space as a rental with limitations, such as serving alcohol, is an issue that the Board and staff need to address and establish a published rate and use policy. I have attached the Iceland House policies and procedures for Special Property Use, what we call rentals, as a template and guide. Traffic through the building for non-museum, partner or Friends sponsored events can help raise a modest perception of vitality but come with a cost of wear and tear, additional routine maintenance and overhead costs. A good measure to use is that if there are other places in the community that are already meeting the needs for assembly space rather than the Norse Museum then it is perhaps better served by reserving the use of its facilities for their own purposes and only allowing by invitation a set number of non-related groups per month to hold meetings. The ability to capture names and addresses being a standard practice and policy in place for each outside group and their guests that use the facility.

The community also perceives that the Board is very set in its ways and has not opened up to the greater community as much as it should. However, the Board appears to serve on various other boards and seem very active in the community. They need to be empowered to act as ambassadors at every opportunity when they are engaged in the community and be able to give an accurate update on happenings and upcoming events at the Norse. This should help stem the misconception.

Relations with other heritage groups -

The Norse enjoys a positive relationship with other heritage and museum sites in the community. The Director and staff are well respected. They have been called on to speak on various occasions from lunchtime programs to academic meetings and symposiums.

Each of the community heritage groups that participated in the MAP assessment look to the Norse as a leadership group. In fact there is an expectation that they will always be at the forefront at a partnering event.

Currently there is no formal consortium of Arkansas Nordic heritage organizations. Perhaps the Norse can convene a more formal group and reach out to even smaller groups. The Director is active in the informal Southeast Arkansas Heritage network of mostly State-run historic sites. It is to be noted that the State of Arkansas is currently cutting back the budgets and limiting access to these sites due to budget concerns. Finding the means of partnerships can help with the constant demands of a small staff. Guest curators from other institutions can produce exhibitions using NM collections that can be displayed at the partnering museum as well the Norse.

Also collaborating with the other regional Arkansas Nordic Heritage sites should also be pursued and encouraged. Again, sharing resources is one the best ways to build visitation. The consortium of curators could equally lead to joint partnerships for marketing and even educational programming.

To some extent a more formal relationship will guarantee a marketing network beyond sharing brochure and rack card space at each other's sites.

With long-range strategic planning and a long-range exhibition calendar, the Norse can work to see related programming and exhibitions at other regional sites that tie in to the themes of their latest changing exhibition. In this way, audiences will have multiple opportunities once they are in the region to explore such topics as quilting, farm practices, clay ware, iron crafts, and samples from the various Arkansas Nordic communities.

The Norse participates in a very successful partnership with these sites at their annual Christmas Market. This should be exploited beyond the immediate region. This is the perfect example of how a program with partnering sites is attracting and building a good solid audience and now with a little extra effort can reach out to a day-trip-by-car audience from perhaps Little Rock and southern Missouri to St. Louis city center out to the Mainline and east to Memphis.

These heritage partners can be useful to develop additional home school curriculum materials and site visits as well as pod-cast and cell phone tours of the region. This is especially important since many of the smaller organizations and even the State Operated sites are now only open a few days, with very limited hours per week.

The Norse finds itself in familiar company as each of the heritage sites represented noted that they all have an ageing support base and a dwindling program support base. Each organization must find the means to get a more youthful audience involved. They must also turn the ageing heritage holders and keepers into heritage sharers and givers.

As Hans Christian Andersen, from the Danish Heritage Center, said, "We can't always do the same things that we always do; sometimes we just have to show the popular things to get non-Danish through the door." This is true to the Norse model – the lunch programs directed to the American Norse League members are fine – but do not get frustrated if the attendance is not growing. The programs that address the wider mission of the heritage of Little Scandinavia need to be directly targeted to the "new families" and people who are transplants and have no connection to the sect.

Lastly – we discussed opportunities for scholarship and utilizing college students. Everyone seemed to agree that there was declining interest in Arkansas Nordic History programs at the two closest colleges, Scandinavia University and Eastern Finnish College. Danish College may still have an active program. I would recommend reaching out to these institutions and letting them know the resources the Norse has to offer – beyond that I am not certain any strategic opportunities exist.

Public Experience

The NM should be proud of the work that they do. The book, archival, and manuscript collections are first rate and truly a national – and international – treasure. The collection of Norse, Arkansas Nordic and regional artifacts is growing and has the potential to expand even further. The institution, even with the limitations of a small operating budget, has the resources of some really qualified professional staff and leadership of a director who has sound management experience and historical background in the subject matter.

The library function of the NM is serving its mission and meeting the demands of its users. Its reputation is well earned and well deserved. Recognized through its scholarship and encouragement of ongoing scholarship the library is the repository for unique manuscripts of the Odin King, historic records of the various Norse League communities, and other source material related to religious tolerance in Arkansas in the colonial era and the founding of the new nation. The small case exhibitions are a nice addition to the visitor experience and should continue to change on a regular basis as staff time permits. Indeed, these add to the visitor experience and can help highlight the various special collections and diverse holdings of the library.

The permanent exhibitions are first rate and professionally installed with good content. The exhibit thematically tells the story of the founder, the religious movement and the immigration and integration of the Norse using the collections and artifacts as touchstones. Without question, the exhibition meets the visitor's expectations and engages interest at all levels of leaning. The criticism that was raised in the self-study materials concerning light levels is warranted, however light levels are muted and acceptable. Public perception can be altered by simply having a sign, or have the volunteers tell visitors the importance of keeping light levels low to protect fragile collections.

Generating repeat visitation with permanent exhibitions is really difficult. There is limited potential for local residents to bring houseguests, or to recommend the exhibit to friends and co-workers. The NM should not however discount the media potential for showcasing the permanent exhibition to yet unknown regional and national audiences. From time to time the museum should issue press notices basically highlighting content that is already in the permanent exhibition. Thematic news release on farming, quilting, migration patterns, the Arkansas Nordics can all be regularly issued. New related educational and public programming such as lectures, gallery talks, craft demonstrations or even new museum shop items (since the Curator also takes responsibility for museum shop content with a fair quantity being made by local crafts persons that is not run-of-the-mill stuff that you would find at other Arkansas Nordic attractions.) can all re-direct focus back to the permanent exhibition and give the public a chance to have a new or even repeat experience.

The changing exhibition schedule is remarkably aggressive and fits well for marketing through the quarterly newsletter and on the website. The local media outlets are picking up on the changing exhibitions. However return on actual numbers is not known since the museum does not conduct regular visitor evaluations. The smaller case exhibitions, regional artist shows, and larger changing exhibitions are however taking a toll on staff workload and the ability to process ever growing collections through acquisitions.

Especially with no additional staff support and a reliance on ageing volunteer network that is not consistent.

The current quilt exhibition is very well done and fills a very flexible, yet suitable changing exhibition space. The labels and content, as well as the mix of quilt styles, is appropriate, however, it is not bringing in visitation. This should not be a surprising revelation. The show was put up without much advance notice sent out to the local press or even posting on the website as a coming attraction. There was no direct marketing plan in place which should have anticipated the opening at least six months in advance. It would have been nice to have related programming on quilting and the importance of quilting to the Norse community planned in advance so that these dates could be published in the regional media. Having a schedule of related programs builds potential audience but also allows for editorial coverage after an exhibitions official opening.

The institution has to develop a long-range exhibition calendar to better exploit the rich collections and quality work they are doing. The exhibition calendar should also list potential opportunities for related programs and potential new audiences and identify partner organizations.

There is a need to focus on the next big thing – not the next small thing. I would suggest cutting down on the number of changing case exhibitions and rotating local artist exhibits. Again, a strategic assessment needs to take place from within to determine the benefits of doing many small things or doing one really big thing – but well.

Has the staff and board fully addressed audience potential for a forthcoming paintings exhibition? Are the resources in place to plan and execute a first class exhibition? Is there planning in place to begin a marketing campaign, send out press releases and put related education and public programming in place? Does the curator have the amount of time available to be able to really say what needs to be said about the unique aspects of Norse paintings? Will the exhibition stand out as a seminal exhibition on the art form and add to the scholarly record by having in place the means to do a catalog or other publication that would last beyond the exhibition period? Could the exhibit travel to other venues around the country? And lastly, is there a potential audience and how will the exhibition meet their needs and expectations? These are the strategic questions that need to be raised and answered for each new exhibition.

An additional area to consider is for the public to enjoy experiences and engagement outside of your own facilities. The Curator and staff understand the significance of their collection and that other museums are planning important exhibitions and are hoping to borrow from them. This should be encouraged and exploited in the media to the fullest extent. Be sure that whenever major artifacts, or even rare books and manuscripts are lent that the NM issues a press release to the local media as well as for distribution by the borrowing institution in their local and regional media market. Be certain that photographs are supplied and that proper credit is always given to the NM and that the ownership of your items is clearly stated in the borrowing exhibition labels and or catalog text.

Programs and special events -

As stated earlier, it is difficult to assess if programs and special events are meeting the needs of the audience without regular evaluations. Concerns were raised in the MAP assessment that the institution may be doing too many events and special programs and that there is a perception of declining interest. This may be the case. The NM needs to conduct a review of its existing offerings and survey its main constituent base to see if they are meeting the needs of their primary audience. The fact that most of the current participants are drawn to the programs from the two support groups, the American Norse League and the Friends Group, should make surveying simple. Consider developing a survey insert to a future edition of the Newsletter and give 10% discount for the museum shop when the survey is completed and returned. Once information is collected then it will be up to the staff and board to determine which programs are warranted and which could be left off the schedule moving forward.

Although there is concern that the Norse no longer sponsors an annual special event day, it is illustrative of the reality that without board, partner organization and community support, these special event days fall solely to the efforts of the staff, a staff that is already burdened with routine day-to-day and special tasks. This same scrutiny should be employed in deciding which public programs, talks, and demonstrations should continue and on what reoccurring calendar cycle they should appear. I fully understand that there are times when the staff feels that a program is entirely mission driven and yet fails to find an audience which leads to frustration. However, the staff and board have to realize that sometimes even the best programs go lacking an audience if they are not marketed well in advance or timed to take place when a targeted core audience would not be available. The only way to understand what will work with your target audience is to ask them, and then evaluate moving forward with realistic attendance goals.

It is reasonable to assume that the current schedule of public programs, all of which are mission related are meeting the needs and providing an audience with a solid experience. What remains elusive is targeting new, younger, and more diverse audiences. If the NM continues to produce only programs targeted towards the American Norse League and the Friends, it stands to reason that new audiences will not be developed, given that both groups are older and the ranks are static, and, or declining. If a strategic commitment is made to develop new audiences the institution should first look to new partner organizations, perhaps even those less tied to the current mission but still active in the local community and begin by jointly sponsoring programs at the Norse and at the partners physical space. These test programs should be evaluated and after a commitment is made over time should continue if they are achieving the goals of attracting new audience or discontinued if they are not.

Summary and Recommendations

Having now completed a MAP Community Engagement Assessment, the Norse Museum must commit itself to working as a single unified entity to accomplish mutually agreed to and accepted goals. It is evident from past MAP assessments, consultant reports, and failed Strategic and Marketing planning that until such time as the staff, board, and representatives from the two support groups come together and set a strategic horizon, the institution will continue along the current path, which is survival, but not sustainable. This written assessment contains an overview of my observations and attempts to frankly address some issues that exist just below the surface of a very well-run and managed organization. The overall positive assessment of the organization's place in the community is rightly attributed to a very dedicated staff and a committed and active Board. Overall, the NM understands and is meeting best practices set forth by the museum community.

The key recommendation for a new and renewed commitment to Strategic Planning should bring about the goals the organization desires in attracting new and diverse audiences, expanding outreach, growing the list of annual support, and maintaining an achievable marketing, programs, and exhibition calendar.

SHORT-TERM GOALS:

- **Strategic Plan:** In order to meet best practices, the NM must make a true commitment to Strategic Planning. Determine first what did not work and identify who was not represented in making the plan and then determine if the goals were too far reaching or not realistically based on the existing operating climate. Second, hold a series of retreats with key constituencies and record short-term projects and goals. Finally, create a Strategic Management team to collect the goals and determine priorities – as well as make the hard decisions on what is to be left out of the Plan and what to keep in play as a horizon project or opportunity project and future goal. Empower the Strategic Management Committee to regularly report, assess and make changes and adjustments as needed to the adopted plan.
- **Marketing Plan:** Once the Strategic Management Committee determines that marketing and audience development is an institutional priority in the Strategic Plan, the institution should carefully craft a Marketing Plan, but only after first making a commitment to regular **visitor evaluations**. If you do not fully understand who the current users are, you cannot determine how to attract new audiences.
- The Norse can and should improve the signage from the main state road. This will just cost the small amount for the new signs and the town will see that they get new signs installed.
- The NM needs to conduct a review of its existing offerings and survey its main constituent base to see if they are meeting the needs of their primary audience. The fact that most of the current participants are drawn to the programs from the two support groups, the American Norse League and the Friends Group should

make surveying simple. Consider developing a survey insert to a future edition of the Newsletter and give 10% discount for the museum shop when the survey is completed and returned. Once information is collected then it will be up to the staff and board to determine which programs are warranted and which could be left off the schedule moving forward.

- The next step in developing a Marketing Plan is to have a long-range **exhibition and program calendar** developed as a team by the professional staff with support of the Board and the Strategic Management Committee. The institution has to develop a long-range exhibition calendar to better exploit the rich collections and quality work they are doing. The exhibition calendar should also list potential opportunities for related programs and potential new audiences and identify partner organizations. Then you must also determine a **geographic scope** for your marketing efforts, develop media relations and press contact lists, and set a budget for purchasing advertisements or broaden electronic media.
- The New Building is very well designed and the sympathetic architecture blends in very well with the older Library Building. The glass storefront is very inviting; however, the visitor's first impression is to see the backs of easels and display boards of the gift shop. It would be more visually appealing to turn some of the merchandise around to face out. Even hanging sample panels of the specialty made Norse quilt fabric or exhibit reproduction paintings would be more inviting from the parking area.

MID-TERM GOALS:

- Once the NM makes a commitment to growth, expanding outreach, and developing new and diverse audiences, the institution must address weaknesses in how visitors who participate can have engaging and enriched experiences, once they get through the front door and are willing to tour or participate in programs at the site. A review of the self-study materials and conversations with the MAP Assessment team and voices represented from the community clearly identified shortcomings in volunteer training that must be addressed. The Norse needs to actively recruit volunteers willing to serve a hospitality function
- The institution should also maintain one master communication and donor list. For this reason the separate lists that seem to be assembling from the individual departments, education, library, and the curator need to be brought into the master list. GenericMuseumSoftware should have the capability to assign source codes so that lists can be sorted by department to allow for separate mailings and the ability for each staff member to cultivate their own followers for gifts to the annual appeal. Increased gifts to annual appeal will be the greatest measure to the success of any marketing and planning protocols that are put in place. The museum donor base is very traditional and is responding well to the direct mail newsletters and annual giving appeals. However, to exploit a younger audience and for more immediate e-blasts and appeals the museum should maintain and build an email database.
- There is an opportunity to engage the parents of current students at the Scandinavian School and Alumni at the annual Parents and Alumni Weekend. In

spite of the past history, this is a consistently changing audience and one that will help grow list of potential annual supporters. All you need to do is get them through the door and capture their names, addresses and or email. The proximity of the school with an enrollment of just about 300 students has great potential for education programs and volunteer service projects. The college prep curriculum and AP classes can also be mined for projects and class visits.

- The NM needs to develop a six-month calendar of upcoming lunch programs and lectures so that participants could plan on attending father in advance. Additionally there was the suggestion of having a regular Friday afternoon quilting class or some other month-long hands on crafting program. There is great potential for parent child programs, such as parent-child quilting or fishing, and even multi-generational grandparent programs.
- There are dark and dead end spaces at the edges of the exhibition spaces. There is one particularly uninviting space that leads to the restrooms on the ground floor that is dismal, another leads to a mechanical closet and there is an abrupt void that leads to the curatorial prep and office space directly from the exhibit hall. Some attention should be paid to these areas to help improve visitor perception
- The roadside signage on the front lawn is small and too wordy to be read while passing along in a car. The new exhibition highlight text is small and is behind old frosted glazing making it very hard read.
- Staff is not getting out into the community. The Chamber of Commerce is active. The business community is substantial with some national and international companies represented, but more importantly there are some good-sized independent companies and small businesses with 50 to 150 employees. The director – as well as the staff and Board members should make it a point to attend a fair number of community meetings sponsored through the Chamber and other organizations, and network. The staff should - Give-out and Get 5 -- business cards each time they venture to a community meeting.
- The Board appears to serve on various other boards and seem very active in the community. They need to be empowered to act as ambassadors at every opportunity when they are engaged in the community and be able to give an accurate update on happenings and upcoming events at the Norse.

LONG-TERM GOALS:

- Once a Marketing Plan is in place, the NM should look to placing regular ads in the community newspapers as an inexpensive means of reaching out the local community beyond their only current source of direct communications which is the quarterly newsletter. Look into a coupon offer – four times per year – *bring in this coupon and receive a 10% discount to our gift shop which is filled with unique handcrafted gifts and local treasures.*

- The new building provides opportunities for civic and community engagement, and even a new earned income stream through the rental of meeting space on the second floor. To do so without a burden being placed on the professional staff, the fees charged need to be raised to cover the costs of maintenance personnel for set-up, breakdown and cleaning of the space. The benefits potentially gained by providing community space as a rental needs to be carefully considered.
- The Norse must continue to be in a leadership position among the other regional history and heritage groups. In fact there is an expectation that they will always be at the forefront at a partnering event. The Norse participates in a very successful partnership with these sites at their annual Christmas Market. This should be exploited beyond the immediate region. This is the perfect example of how a program with partnering sites is attracting and building a good solid audience and now with a little extra efforts can reach out to a day trip by car audience.
- These heritage partners can be useful to develop additional home school curriculum materials and site visits as well as pod-cast and cell phone tours of the region. This is especially important since many of the smaller organizations and even the State Operated sites are now only open a few days, with very limited hours per week.
- The institution needs to prepare for the day in the future when this non-league based museum and library is all that remains to preserve, share, and tell the rich history and contributions of the Norse. Building additional library and collections storage, taking on entire barn collections or examples of quilting, needlework, and paintings are only the practical needs of the future. The organization must continue to foster a generational transfer of heritage within families and especially between grandparents and grandchildren. In the process document the remaining stories and personal histories before they disappear.

Characteristics of Excellence for U.S. Museums

Public Trust & Accountability

- The museum is a good steward of its resources held in the public trust.
- The museum identifies the communities it serves, and makes appropriate decisions in how it serves them.
- Regardless of its self-identified communities, the museum strives to be a good neighbor in its geographic area.
- The museum strives to be inclusive and offers opportunities for diverse participation.
- The museum asserts its public service role and places education at the center of that role.
- The museum demonstrates a commitment to providing the public with physical and intellectual access to the museum and its resources.
- The museum is committed to public accountability and is transparent in its mission and its operations.
- The museum complies with local, state, and federal laws, codes, and regulations applicable to its facilities, operations, and administration.

Mission & Planning

- The museum has a clear understanding of its mission and communicates why it exists and who benefits as a result of its efforts.
- All aspects of the museum's operations are integrated and focused on meeting its mission.
- The museum's governing authority and staff think and act strategically to acquire, develop, and allocate resources to advance the mission of the museum.
- The museum engages in ongoing and reflective institutional planning that includes involvement of its audiences and community.
- The museum establishes measures of success and uses them to evaluate and adjust its activities.

Leadership & Organizational Structure

- The governance, staff, and volunteer structures and processes effectively advance the museum's mission.
- The governing authority, staff, and volunteers have a clear and shared understanding of their roles and responsibilities.
- The governing authority, staff, and volunteers legally, ethically, and effectively carry out their responsibilities.
- The composition, qualifications, and diversity of the museum's leadership, staff, and volunteers enable it to carry out the museum's mission and goals.
- There is a clear and formal division of responsibilities between the governing authority and any group that supports the museum, whether separately incorporated or operating within the museum or its parent organization.

Collections Stewardship

- The museum owns, exhibits, or uses collections that are appropriate to its mission.
- The museum legally, ethically, and effectively manages, documents, cares for, and uses the collections.
- The museum's collections-related research is conducted according to appropriate scholarly standards.
- The museum strategically plans for the use and development of its collections.
- Guided by its mission, the museum provides public access to its collections while ensuring their preservation.

Education & Interpretation

- The museum clearly states its overall educational goals, philosophy, and messages, and demonstrates that its activities are in alignment with them.
- The museum understands the characteristics and needs of its existing and potential audiences and uses this understanding to inform its interpretation.
- The museum's interpretive content is based on appropriate research.
- Museums conducting primary research do so according to scholarly standards.
- The museum uses techniques, technologies, and methods appropriate to its educational goals, content, audiences, and resources.
- The museum presents accurate and appropriate content for each of its audiences.
- The museum demonstrates consistent high quality in its interpretive activities.
- The museum assesses the effectiveness of its interpretive activities and uses those results to plan and improve its activities.

Financial Stability

- The museum legally, ethically, and responsibly acquires, manages, and allocates its financial resources in a way that advances its mission.
- The museum operates in a fiscally responsible manner that promotes its long-term sustainability.

Facilities & Risk Management

- The museum allocates its space and uses its facilities to meet the needs of the collections, audience, and staff.
- The museum has appropriate measures to ensure the safety and security of people, its collections and/or objects, and the facilities it owns or uses.
- The museum has an effective program for the care and long-term maintenance of its facilities.
- The museum is clean and well-maintained, and provides for the visitors' needs.
- The museum takes appropriate measures to protect itself against potential risk and loss.