

Sample Report: Organizational Assessment

Museum Assessment Program American Association of Museums

“Gotham” Museum

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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 a good report?

While following the new report writing guidelines, this report really showcases characteristics of excellence throughout the different sections with the entire characteristics listed at the end. Additionally, it breaks up all of the sections’ recommendations by short-term, mid-term and long-term goals, making it easier for the museum to develop a workplan. Furthermore, it stresses disaster planning. This is also a good representation of how to address the complexities of a city museum and can be applied to many museums with parent organizations.

Organizational Museum Assessment Program Report
Metropolis Museum of Gotham, New Gotham State
June 1 - 3, 2015
By Lois Lane

Executive Summary

The Metropolis Museum of Gotham is a good and solid history museum, with a staff that is passionate about Gotham history and universally pleased to be associated with the museum. The museum has multiple sites that together have solid but not remarkable attendance, and tell a range of important stories from Gotham history. The museum is underappreciated by the community and struggles with its city-owned makeup and its resulting treatment somewhat as a step-child. The community faces potentially dire economic circumstances as the recent earthquake immediately threatens the state's entire economy and the museum's budget.

This assessment was designed to identify ways to strengthen fundraising, public outreach, and governance. These are three very important areas, but new economic events make strategic staffing issues even more immediately critical to address. The museum is in an awkward position of being a city museum, hampered in employee management by a merit system, and with a governing board that in the past has been relatively uninterested in the museum. The current director of seven years has taken steps to encourage the city to appoint more engaged board members and then build deeper engagement with existing members, and the result has been very positive. This board has used its own funds to hire staff to address certain areas of strategic need, namely events management and fundraising. While the dual nature of personnel oversight provides some complications, it may also provide an option for restructuring.

It appears that the stressful times have created a situation where many staff fear for their jobs daily, and some staff relationships have become strained as some cling to unhappy histories. This has caused some staff members to simply keep their heads down and work quietly. This limits an otherwise marvelous organization from achieving its potential. Though we cannot immediately improve the community's or the museum's financial conditions, increased internal communication, clearer staff expectations and accountability, regular recognition of the impressive and important individual and departmental achievements and, most importantly, a significant realignment of staff positions, will support shared institutional priorities and help the institution navigate the challenges and improve museum-wide results.

Introduction

This OMAP visit took place June 1 - 3, 2015. This report summarizes information collected through the museum's self-evaluation, its own documentation, and my interviews and observations over a day and a half. This is a rather large organization, so I interviewed small groups of individuals and arranged for private time with others. Clark Kent, Director of Development, was my primary contact. I spent a good deal of time with Clark, including lunch both days and dinner the first evening. He also participated in one of the group discussions. Clark recommended that the museum apply for this program.

Day One

Clark collected me at the airport and we had a 45-minute ride in to the museum. This gave us a chance to get comfortable with each other, quickly review the agenda, and orient me a bit to the city/county relationship economically and politically. Many meetings followed:

Private meeting with Bruce Wayne, Director

Group meeting with Curator of Exhibitions; Research Historian; Registrar; and Technician/Collections.

Lunch nearby with Clark

Group meeting with Assistant Director; Administration/Finance; Administration; and Museum Attendant Supervisor

Group meeting with members of the Board and the Friends

Group meeting with Curator of Education; Tour Coordinator and Education Assistant; and Events Coordinator.

Dinner with Clark Kent for some traditional Gotham fare and a drive around the city and its neighborhoods to identify other active nonprofits and to orient me to the community and economy.

Day Two

Tour of the exhibits with two Explainers.

Meeting with Museum Attendant/Computer room; Education Assistant; Administration; Volunteers; Museum Store Operator; and Museum Attendant and three explainers

Lunch with Clark

Tour of collections offices and storage, exhibits workshop, and the education offices.

We added extra time to the agenda in the afternoon of the second day so that I could visit the Curiosity Place - a science museum housed in the same building but with no formal relationship with the Museum, and Fort Gotham, which is a Metropolis Museum of Gotham property. This also gave me time to visit with the front-line staff not available for meetings at other times, including the front desk staff and a gift shop staff member. This also gave me an extra opportunity to meet privately with the assistant director.

Phone conversation with Board President

Closing meeting with Director Bruce Wayne

Dinner with three representatives from The Friends in an historic Gotham neighborhood.

Day Three

VERY early in the morning Clark kindly delivered me to the airport.

Museum History

The organization known as the Museums of the City of Gotham began in 1941. Originally it was a city agency and has been recently changed to a city department. At various times in its history, it has managed two historic houses that now are no longer part of the museum: the Gotham Police Museum and historic Fort Gotham; and various locations for off-site storage. Today the museum is located at Old City Hall, catty-corner to historic Fort Gotham, and a block or two from the Police Museum and a block from the New City Hall.

The museum is governed by a board appointed by the city of Gotham. The museum's funds come almost entirely from the city of Gotham, but the board has funds from previous decades that it was given by the city but were not completely used. These funds are often assigned to educational programs and exhibits, and currently cover the salaries of the events coordinator, a museum technician, and the director of development.

In 2003 Gotham and the museum were hit by Hurricane Joker. It was not a direct hit but the downtown area still suffered four feet of water in the surge. Beyond the physical destruction to the city, the museum required first-floor repairs throughout and significant collections conservation, which is only now being completed. The economic effect was substantial. The temporary economic boon due to the influx of displaced residents from other Joker-damaged areas and as a staging site for much recovery work has passed, and now the city finds itself faced with another environmental disaster. Gotham's economy has been threatened by an earthquake that recently struck the area. It has dramatically

disrupted the local industry and tourism. During my visit, the previously full plane was only half-full as travelers appeared to cancel vacations.

Management and Administration

Characteristics of excellence that relate to Facilities and Risk Management, according to National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums, include: “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; and the museum takes appropriate measures to protect itself against potential risk and loss.”

This is a difficult standard to fully achieve due to the organizational and financial constraints of the city-owned format. The current director has been in place for seven years. He follows a longtime director who left under unhappy circumstances leaving behind a divided staff. The current director has an impressive amount of experience in the field as past director of multiple libraries, and his board truly values his background and abilities. He has chosen a patient steady path toward increasingly professional museum practice that is showing success.

The director has a knowing relationship with the city, based on his many years of working with governmental organizations. He participates in GothamGenius meetings and includes the Curator of Exhibition in these meetings. GothamGenius is a management-by-measuring approach. It has the important advantage of including the director in city-wide meetings. The purpose and value of these meetings seems unclear to the rest of the staff who also feel that the inclusion of the Curator of Exhibitions, and not others, indicates his favored status. The Curator’s management style of measuring work completed, and goals achieved, suits the GothamGenius approach more so than others’.

Finances

As a city entity the museum must follow governmental guidelines for much of its finances. Not surprisingly the details of this are a mystery to most museum members, and offer little if any flexibility, but increased transparency is possible and a budget developed either by cost-centers or clearer cost categories is an important goal. The development director has significant financial organization experience and should be consulted in this process. This should help accounting staff feel more confident and empowered in their work.

As a city entity there is no endowment, but the board’s funds, separate from the annual budget, allow for some flexibility in spending that is a great help at times. There is no debt. I am unclear about a specific annual board budget and suspect that it has operated on an as-needed basis to this point. That may work a bit longer, but if financial and administrative needs lead the museum to depend more heavily upon the board for support, then a budget will soon be a very critical management tool.

Fundraising

The board has recently hired a director of development, who is not a city employee. Adding private fundraising to the museum’s survival efforts is critical. It will take years to develop a habit of individual support for the museum because of its city connections, but it is a worthwhile foundational practice that will serve the institution well in the future. Clark Kent is extremely talented, well connected, thoughtful, and committed. Because he is new, he has no stake in past structure or experiences at the museum and is able to act independently with the professional interests of the museum always at the heart of his work.

Though federal granting agencies and some private funders support city governments through grants, a tax exempt 501(c)(3) status for the museum will dramatically expand its capacity to attract private gifts and grants. This will allow the museum to make great strides in programming, exhibits, and collections care and to secure technical support, including staff training and even equipment upgrades while allowing the museum to devote more of its city income to administrative and facility needs. The museum is attractive and professional and has an engaging story to tell and does so in affective manner that will attract grant support. Within the staff realignment I recommend a growing emphasis on developing a grant application process, perhaps starting with a new part-time staffer. Grant proposal writing skills are

very different from other development work and not often found in the same staff member, so as the grant program grows, the position often becomes full-time. Remember, though, that return-on-investment for a grant proposal writer usually takes nine months to a full year because of the award process.

During the visit I mentioned to some staff, but perhaps not enough, that fundraising is everyone's job. Fundraising doesn't always mean asking for money, but it does always mean positively engaging with the public and always looking for, and sharing with the administration, potential ways to attract gifts, support, and partnerships that support the museum's work.

Facilities, Safety and Security

Funds for facility maintenance suffer as city funds suffer. They have been insufficient for some time. The facilities are managed by a team who are retired police officers who, without a museum background, do not have the same museum "language" as some of the other employees, or similar commitment to mission, but are quite committed to the museum. They have a solid understanding of facilities management, computer systems, and security and are proud of their roles. They are concerned, justifiably, that deferred maintenance will soon become a problem. Security issues of inoperable cameras (only one still works), especially at a time when Gotham may experience increased job stress, are important to protect against theft. Recent damage to the Museum's truck one night when parked in the spaces next to the building, may be an early indicator. Security staff must be vigilant, and in a time of fewer docents, take seriously their responsibility to engage the public. They are an important part of the hospitality team, and some in particular have acquired a significant knowledge of Gotham history: all could be expected to do so.

The museum is certainly well within the flood zone and is vulnerable to weather-related disasters. The offsite storage areas are less so. The chief of security understandably would like the museum and its important collections to be in a far safer location, but that is not an option. In the meantime the museum has recent experience with a natural disaster and has developed strategies, skills, and plans for future responses. Annual practice drills should be enacted every year before hurricane season begins. All staff should practice their role in disaster response. The staff would like to create 'disaster tubs', twelve or so, filled with response supplies and distributed through the main museum and the other historic sites and storage areas. I think this is a priority activity that could be funded through a technical support grant or, if not sooner, through NEH's Preservation Assistance Grant next May.

There were comments that the building management system (BMS) may be failing. This will contribute to inefficiencies when instead it could be saving money. Gotham has a keen understanding of the importance of environmental sustainability; an energy review now would be very appropriate.

For many reasons staff members suggested the museum could use a space assessment and plan. I agree that plan would be very helpful in making efficient use of workspaces and storage space, but I am not sure it will produce significant suggestions for changes to exhibit spaces, except for the occasional use of small rooms on the second floor, which at one time were city offices, or community exhibits mentioned earlier. There is a room to the right of the entry foyer that was planned to be used as an informal café area but has not remained open because of poor traffic. It is now a rather undefined space that serves only for lunch space when the classroom is full. It's possible that this easily accessible space could become a discovery room or a flexible area for sharing community exhibits: a church group might create a history of its congregation to be displayed there for two months of the year, and Gotham neighborhoods might sign up to do community exhibits. This requires staff you do not yet have, but is worth planning for.

Recommendations

Short-term

- Work with the Development Director to create a more refined chart of accounts that reflects museum practices and needs
- Continue to build private fundraising capacity of the museum or board
- Conduct an annual appeal with the membership
- Develop an annual grants plan (perhaps 6 applications in year one and 12 in year two) for funds for technical support, professional development, and collections care, education, and exhibits

- Apply to NEH for funds for disaster tubs if not funded before next May
- Practice disaster-response drills every year before hurricane season
- Ask the city to conduct a security audit so that it is aware of current conditions and its exposure to risk
- Ask the city to conduct an energy audit to determine potential energy savings through improved systems, simple fine-tuning, and replacements or upgrades to reduce operating costs and ease the city budget.
- The museum should be on the city's list for energy efficiency funds through the Recovery Act, and those funds could support replacement of the BMS.

Mid-term

- Develop a schedule of annual maintenance for the facility and work with the city to attach similar needs and other city locations simultaneously to control costs and increase likelihood of completion
- Coordinate this facility's energy-upgrades with city-wide efficiency programs
- Design a more stable funding model for the museum not based so significantly on city finances
- Conduct a space plan

Long-term

- Develop a schedule of facilities upgrades

Mission & Planning

Characteristics of excellence that relate to mission and planning, according to National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums, include: "the museum has a clear understanding of its mission and communicates why it exists and who benefits as a result of its efforts; all aspect 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; the museum engages in ongoing and reflective institutional planning that includes involvement of its audiences and community; and the museum establishes measures of success and uses them to evaluate and adjust its activities."

In as much as the city-designed structure allows, the museum fulfills much of this standard and continues to pursue complete adherence. Future planning and reflective planning with the community are the next important steps in meeting this standard.

Mission

The statement for the 2000 Strategic Plan reads:

"The Museums of the City of Gotham, which includes the Gotham History Museum, the Gotham Police Museum and Gotham House, will seek to interpret the cultural, social, economic and political history of the Gotham Bay area and southwest New Gotham State, and its diverse population through the collection, exhibition, research and conservation of artifacts from pre-history to the present."

In the self-study activities the MAP team brought in a facilitator to assist with the Mission Statement Activity and unanimously agreed upon the new definition. It has not moved to board level.

Mission: History is our Mission to celebrate and preserve.

Vision Statement: Exploring the Past, Engaging the Present, Empowering the Future

Guiding Principles: The museum of the City of Gotham serves the community by collecting and conserving artifacts, exhibiting and interpreting artifacts, engaging and educating our diverse audiences through programming.

While not conforming to exact standards of mission design, it is a very important example of broader participation by all levels of staff and volunteers. Anecdotally it is clear that the exercise demonstrates an interest by all staff members in being included in planning and visioning for the Institution. I must say I have never been at that institution where, entirely unbidden, every single staff member, from every level, demonstrated pride in their city's history, pride in their personal knowledge of the history, and pride in the story is Museum tells and its potential to tell more stories well.

Planning

The last strategic plan was adopted in 2004 for The Museums of the City of Gotham. At that time the museum was in a different location and also had care of two historic houses in addition to the Police Museum. The plan has a very well-developed format with key strategic and operating initiatives or activities; the subsequent plan created in 2009 is far, far less substantial. It was completed two years after a major institutional achievement when the museum was relocated to its present location in the Old Gotham Market complex. It may reflect the board or the city's feeling that the museum had "arrived" and that there was less to do now. The objectives are appropriate but very, very general and lack action steps that stimulate completion. The plan has no timeline and cannot be considered a strong guide for future planning.

The director has the experience and talent to know when to trigger the next strategic plan and his improvements to the board and his endorsement of this assessment are good steps in planning to plan. He has been onboard, however for three very complicated years, and is probably only just now in a position to plan to plan successfully. The Museum should prepare to begin comprehensive strategic planning within a year. The changing economic environment and the museum, after 10 years in this new location, require an updated plan.

A thoughtful, proactive plan or planning process is a key ingredient to competitive grant application to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). IMLS's annual Museums for America program funds a variety of important museum practices and should be on the annual to-apply list for each fall.

Recommendations:

Short-term

- Plan to plan: prepare to begin a new strategic planning process within a year

Mid-term

- During that planning process review various mission statements and plan formats to select those that provide increased depth and actionable plans than in the current plan

Long-term

- In developing a plan, consider a long-range (8 – 10-year) evolution to non-city ownership, or at least significantly less city dependence in order to develop a mission-based approach to budgeting and staffing.

Leadership, Staff and Governance

Characteristics of excellence that relate to Governance, according to National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums, include: "the governance, staff and volunteer structures and processes effectively advance the 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."

The museum is working toward complete support of this standard and recognizes the areas in which it needs more work. The greatest concern is that economic conditions have changed and no longer support the current personnel structure because existing staff design doesn't maximize return-on-investment for personnel expenses. The city structure creates some complications that the museum works hard to overcome, and it will be important to identify and articulate the appropriate relationships and activities among three critical entities – the board, the city, and the Friends.

Board design, like staff makeup, is a continual process. The museum has a governing board appointed by the city councilors. The current board president is engaged, constructive, and hopeful. The others I met are as well. In the past, however, board appointments have not been made with the intention to the museum, and board engagement has been uneven. Since the arrival of the current director, board selection is beginning to respond to identified museum needs. Many different voices applauded the steady work to inform the city of necessary board skills and interests, and to begin

to fill term vacancies based on these needs. This should continue, and current identified needs are spot on. Staff and board members both commented on this important and hopeful change

The board orientation material I saw is more than a decade old and certainly requires updating. Board members have term limits, and meet monthly with additional executive committee meetings. Those I met and spoke with had a clear interest in the museum and in engaging other board members with the same level of commitment. The governing board is increasingly interested in understanding the profession's expectations and in appropriately supporting and leading the Museum. The board is expanding its participation without interfering with day-to-day practice. The board is not always aware of staff activities but is reluctant to overstep its boundaries. Its members should feel free though to work with the director to invite, or accept requests for an invitation from, staff to present information at board meetings. It would be appropriate to allot 15 minutes at each meeting to, for example, review the successes of the school and public programs associated with the Douglas exhibit; to hear an update from the development officer; or to meet with the Public Relations Coordinator to review roles, results, and expectations. Certainly this connection would be especially appropriate for review of performance of any board-funded positions so the board and employee are clear on the staff members' responsibilities, activities, performance, and concerns, and can use that information for planning, support, and guiding the museum. Through these meetings the staff would be recognized for their work and encouraged to remain focused on priorities while the board becomes better informed on personnel issues and museum activities.

The Friends

This volunteer support group has had a history of providing financial support for collections acquisitions, as have many similar groups for museums across the country. Often the relationships between the museum and these separate organizations evolve over time and develop without understanding of professional practice between museums and supporting groups. The Friends members seem ready to let go of such past misunderstandings and missteps and work with the museum and its new director to support the mission and related activities, but the Friends group appears to feel stymied by an unclear relationship, unsatisfied hopes, and confused signals. Taking time to discuss the Friends' role in support of the museum staff and board, and the city, may clarify needs and interests while solidifying the partnership. Developing a memorandum of understanding can help all groups understand the proper relationship of these organizations and establish shared expectations that can produce equally valued results. Friends' fundraising should be clearly identified as for the good of the museum and AAM standards require that the gifts not be restricted to certain activities. Though it would not be appropriate for a representative of the Friends to have a voting membership on the museum board, ex-officio membership and clear communication and acknowledgement of services rendered is certainly expected and appropriate. The Friends group is a committed, passionate organization and its leaders expressed a willingness to help in a variety of areas if asked; they are simply unclear on where best to help.

Staffing

The museum and the environment surrounding it has changed, but the personnel design has not kept pace. In a merit system the newest are first to be let go and long-timers are supported regardless of ability, performance, and appropriateness. In such lean times staff management requires maximum flexibility in position design and staff selection, but city-determined, merit-based staffing cuts have left the museum with a staff structure that is top-heavy and not responsive to museum priorities. The board's structural flexibility in supporting the acquisition of appropriate staff, as compared to the City's, can be very, very important, as it enables the museum to select staff more effectively for the organization. The director has a great deal of appropriate latitude that is unusual in a hybrid governance model, but he has little-to-no support from the city for changing a system when it impedes progress because of the restrictions of the city system of merit-based employment.

The city employees are supervised by director and retained on merit-based system governed by city human resource regulations. The employees funded by the board are supervised by the director. The City Personnel Board's job descriptions are seriously outdated and no longer reflect actual practice and would benefit from guidelines useful for evaluation. Developing working expectations for each position with attached quarterly or annual work expectations would help satisfy the staff's interests and needs for accountability. The current use of POAs – Plan of Action – in the Curatorial/Exhibitions section is an example of a working use of this idea. A thoughtful concern about such 'boxes' – job descriptions and responsibilities – is that it may and has encouraged people to look only to their list and be reluctant or

refuse to work outside that box. This is a distinct consequence of job descriptions and can be avoided by creating a departmental mission that includes expectations of working across departments and across positions to achieve shared goals.

The current assistant director has been with the Museum for nearly 25 years and has served as interim director on more than one occasion. Her depth of knowledge and her community connections are valuable, but her lack of professional museum training and her willingness to polarize the museum means she is not as productive as the museum needs her to be. This is a substantial problem under any conditions but particularly in this time of economic stress.

To adapt to economic conditions and to changing audience and programming needs, the museum must realign position activities and responsibilities based on museum needs. This means eliminating some positions and adding others. As an example, this might mean a shift to two assistant or associate directors: director of community relations and director of visitor experience. The director would supervise the two assistant directors and manage administrative staff with the help of an assistant. The director of community relations would manage development, membership, events and rentals, institutional partnerships, and relationships with advisory board, the Friends, and the Board of Directors. This position is most likely funded by the board. The director of visitor experience would oversee collections, exhibits, education, and the Front Line (facilities, security, desk, and shop). At the moment the assistant director's job description is almost exactly like the director's, and it leaves the visitor experience divided up among a series of curators (exhibits, and the vacant history and collections curators) but with no one champion.

Professional Development

Severe budget cuts have eliminated all professional development. Perhaps a strategic application to the board for support of non-travel development, particularly membership in organizations such as American Association of Museum or Association for State and Local History, Smithsonian Affiliations, American Association of Museum Volunteers, BoardSource, and National Association of Museum Exhibitions, with their attendant publications and – most importantly – listservs, would begin to fill that gap, helping staff feel less isolated and more confident. The staff is talented, engaged, and motivated, but is suffering from the economic uncertainty and the limited staffing levels. Some staff suggested in-house professional development, shared learning among peers, which might be an excellent way to build cross-communication and address the lack of funds for travel.

Staff Communication

The director is well liked and considered by nearly all to be a desperately needed change from the previous director. The staff wishes they saw more of him in and about the museum, which he and I discussed as a gentle reminder of the tried-and-true value of management-by-walking-around. He has an open-door policy that staff should take advantage of more readily, remembering that an open door is for communication, not always agreement, but that communication increases the likelihood of understanding and agreement. As with all organizations, there are individual staff concerns of lack of appreciation, favoritism, or disconnection that have as much to do with reasonable concerns as with individual struggles to acquire the skills to effectively advocate for themselves and their departments. It is clear to me that job performance is rewarded by continued opportunities, a stronger voice in museum activities, and increased communication that create a continuous feedback loop that builds positively. Staff should feel encouraged to take the initiative to participate in that loop by communicating their work, their successes and their concerns, and by becoming part of the solution. The director has an important opportunity to mentor the younger members of his staff. There are few museum career opportunities in the region and he has the pick of the regional talent. They are eager to learn, practice, and succeed, and his depth of experience could have a great impact on their careers and personal development.

Not surprisingly an overworked staff has too little time for communication, but during times of stress cross-departmental communication, and performance recognition become even more important. A regular schedule of must-do meetings may only add to a bureaucratic feeling, so a suggestion of an all-staff meeting more often need not be every Monday, or even every first Monday, but would be appropriate if schedule before a new season, a new major exhibit, or when a big change is coming about to take place. The new Monday museum closing makes this more possible. Such a large, honeycombed building makes communication a challenge in the best atmosphere, so a commitment to a culture of communication must be an intentional change and practice. More information may reduce

the nervous tendencies of staff and volunteers at all levels to see a single incident of unhappiness or error as evidence of a large problem, or to swarm an issue – positively or negatively - based on insufficient information. Increased communication at all levels can begin to relieve the tendency for the atmosphere to become charged.

Intimidation is never acceptable, and several staff feel intimidated at times by very strong mid-level individuals. The staff realignment can address this partially, as will developing a stated commitment to formally and informally broadening communication channels and by individuals taking the initiative to address concerns through supervisors and with the director.

Team development of projects (educators involved in exhibit design, curators involved in outreach program design) will help share information among departments and produce a more effective and successful product with less angst. For example, when a new exhibit is on the table, exhibits, collections, education, public relations, the frontline staff *and* fundraising staff should be involved from the beginning. They will flow in and out at different rates, but they're critical for making sure the project has initial resources and then adequate programming and communication components so that it engages enough of the public to increase public participating and earned and gifted income. The team members will vary from project to project, but the basic museum functions will appear in each team.

Recommendations:

Short-term

- Reorganize the current staffing plan to reflect priority museum needs
- Work with the city to create job descriptions that reflect present responsibilities if at all possible.
- Institute annual reviews based on more accurate position descriptions and work expectations, with appropriate oversight that avoids abuse or favoritism on the part of the reviewer. Abilities and performance review, not years of employment, should increasingly become the guiding principle in staff decisions.
- Whether or not the job descriptions change or can be adapted, each position should have an annual plan, with associated expectations, that reflect present actual responsibilities and expectations but leave opportunity for cross-departmental collaboration and creativity.
- Create an employee handbook
- Increase efforts to encourage cross-departmental communication so that staff is informed and is rewarded for cooperation
- Develop a memorandum of understanding among the museum, board, and the Friends, to identify roles, expectations, and commitments in a manner that reduces confusion and realigns commitments
- Continue the practice of the city asking the director and the board for information regarding the necessary skills and interests in future appointees.
- Create a new board orientation packet. A recent addition to the board and a brand-new board member just joining could work together with the director or the development director to design a packet that is up to date and is responsive to the new level of board engagement.
- Take advantage of **free** professional development. As a MAP participant you have access to the full Museum Essentials webinar series, as well as the recorded versions of the previous year's series.

Mid-term

- As you are able, but as a priority, consider ways to create a fund or format to increase support for positions not funded through the city, particularly in positions of leadership.
- Gradually develop a more robust board training and development program to build understanding of the museum and build engagement in its mission.
- Identify funds to re-establish professional memberships that provide professional development and support, and consider partnering with area museums to purchase shared professional development web-training on occasion

Long-term

- Continue to build board engagement in the planning for the museum and in brokering its presence in the community and its value to the community.

Interpretation & Education

Characteristics of excellence that relate to Interpretation and Education, according to [National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums](#), include: “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; and the museum assesses the effectiveness of its interpretive activities and uses those results to plan and improve its activities.”

In as far as finances allow, the museum fulfills this standard. The staff is aware of best practices and works to achieve them.

Exhibits

The Curator of Exhibits is widely known as a near-magician in creating exhibits. His organizational abilities and talents have allowed him to develop great credibility and stature within the museum. He has a record of establishing and achieving goals for himself and within much of his team. The museum has a very impressive exhibits shop most museums can only dream of. Once there were more than a few full-time staff, but no longer. The museum attendant working here, often called a preparator in other museums, was an enthusiastic and positive team member who clearly enjoyed his work and the knowledge he has gained working at the museum.

I had an excellent tour of the Timeline Exhibit given by an explainer. The explainers are college and graduate-level students interested in museum careers. They are funded through a recent grant and are widely considered to be one of the best museum advancements of late. The timeline exhibit is a high-quality, interesting, engaging, informative exhibit on the history of New Gotham State. It has been somewhat updated since its installation 10 years ago with the opening of the museum, is in good repair, and clearly is well-received by the school groups and casual visitors alike. The staff is anxious to update and refresh the exhibit, but as this is not the museum’s most pressing challenge, any concerns they have about its relevance can be temporarily addressed through the successful explainer program, and carefully replaced segments (like the generic slave ship) that reflect detailed Gotham history.

Explainers took me through a traveling exhibit on Frederick Douglas created by the Megapolis Museum. We rejoined half way by a second equally talented explainer. The exhibit is very good and has been successful. The museum planned and implemented a vegetable garden project at nearby Fort Gotham in partnership with a local school and in keeping with the exhibit theme. The exhibit has been popular and the press has been very good.

There is not yet consensus among departments, I believe, on the value and institutional strategies associated with incoming traveling exhibits versus institution-developed exhibits. The Curator of Exhibits could take the lead in helping the institution develop an exhibition philosophy and strategy that considers and addresses both concepts and adds community-curated exhibits to the mix. Many Museum staff feel that these high profile traveling exhibits are the key to the museum’s future. There are many who feel that any administration and excitement surrounding visiting exhibits takes away from those with more local flavor that could engage the Gotham community more fully. As with most museums, the answer is somewhere in between and the current five-year exhibit plan is a mix of visiting exhibits and museum-made exhibits focusing on more local issues. In the discussion with the exhibits/collections staff and with the Friends and board members, it was clear that many would welcome small community designed exhibits to increase engagement and local storytelling in the museum’s interpretation. Community curation is a complicated activity where the process of developing the exhibit is actually a more important product than the end exhibit. The process creates deep audience engagement and broadens the museum’s connection to the public. This would be new and important activity that the museum is interested in, but for which it definitely lacks support. The recommended staff reorganization can redistribute funding and attract staff, whether through the re-establishment of a collections leader

and/or the reestablishment of an historian, and/or the installation of the once-planned minority history curator, that would enable this important opportunity for the museum.

Docents and Explainers

The explainer program is only a few months old. Explainers participate in substantial active learning for their roles. The museum's existing docent cadre was invited to participate in this training but few accepted the invitation at more than a very basic level. Docents are on hand for tours and as extra eyes in the museum. The docent cadre, like at many museums, is increasingly older, less active, and less committed to active museum practice. I have recommended that the staff consider joining the American Association for Museum Volunteers, to participate in the discussion list, and to read its very valuable handbook or guidance in dealing with an aging docent group. If funding allows, it appears as if the museum will trend toward more explainers and fewer docents. I would not counsel abandoning the docent program or any other type of volunteer activities, but the museum should continue the explainer program, as long as funding is available, as a way to increase audience engagement; make looking for new funding sources a priority.

Research

The Museum is very understaffed in this area, but the Research Historian is a very experienced and committed long-time employee. In the absence of a Curator of History, he manages the reference library and all research needs for exhibits and education, and for administrative requests for support material and institutional history for grant proposals and other work. The space assessment might turn up a more publicly accessible work space that can be designed to flow smoothly and encourage greater use by the public (as staffing allows).

Freedom Village

I'm mentioning this as a separate subject because it is not a museum property but represents an important opportunity that merits the museum direct attention whether or not it becomes the managing entity. *Freedom Village* was established in 1842 as a settlement for Africans who arrived in Gotham as free blacks. It is an exciting opportunity to showcase a unique intersection of European and African cultures. The site remains accessible on the river and is being investigated by an archaeological team from the college of X&Y. Of course the X&Y team is aware of Ivor Noel Hume's work at Wolstenholme in present-day Williamsburg, but the museum staff and board interested in this project would benefit from reading [Martin's Hundred](#) (the history of the archaeological site) and learning from Colonial Williamsburg Foundation about the discovery and interpretive process and the subsequent evolution of the museum and programming on site. It is an enormous task to undertake but one that has very, very important potential implications in American History alone, but also for a museum of the history of Gotham to take an active role in protecting local heritage and engaging its community in exploring and sharing that heritage.

Recommendations:

Short-term

- Continue the explainer program while thoughtfully allowing docents uninterested in continuing their training in public engagement to segue into less active roles
- Perhaps the docents become something else, such as the D-Team available to serve on-demand as a multi-service corps during their allotted weekly schedules: shop pricing, special event support, envelope-filling, school group guides, special guest escorts, etc.
- Apply to VISTA/AmeriCorps for a full-time volunteer museum attendant to help with programming and audience engagement.
- Support *Freedom Village* developments through public programs and public updates

Mid-term

- Plan strategic tests of the best way to pilot small community-curated projects
- Explore ways to support the *Freedom Village* project so that it is branded with the museum
- Actively review the opportunity for community-curated exhibits and begin experimenting to develop the best process and to identify the most appropriate spaces

Long-term

- Consider the *Freedom Village* project as a potential catalyst in the evolving design of the Museum's organizational structure

Education

Audience Engagement and Public Relations

It's very easy to think we're in the museum business and to focus solely on museum practice, but museum work *is* community engagement. Where traditionally museum roles were organized as silos, modern needs require all staff to engage in public relations and community engagement in varying capacities, as with fundraising: everyone builds partnerships; everyone makes friends in the community. When the museum attendant tells stories of being the source for local history information among his friends, this is an example of everyone being responsible for engaging Gotham in the life of the museum. The staff feels this, but articulating it repeatedly will increase this understanding so that every phone answered, every person greeted, is done with a smiling voice and a helpful attitude.

The budget for advertising looks large, in print, but in effect is a catch-all line for advertising-like activities. Accountability for advertising, promotion, and engagement dollars is critical for identifying effectiveness of each practice so the museum can improve its return on investment. Advertising alone will only attract those folks already interested in the museum and its activities. New audiences grow through outreach and engagement. The connection with the public schools for the Douglas garden is an example, as are the invitations to leaders of local churches.

Every institution is disappointed by the number of locals who don't know the museum. This appears to be more of a common challenge in the field rather than being particular to this museum. There is equal anecdotal evidence that new visitors discover the museum regularly and promise to encourage others to discover it too. Still it is a concern as is the confusion over *what* the Museum is. It is often confused with the art museum. When people try to visit, it is quite difficult to recognize the entrance. The structure has a multi-entrance historic façade plus the barrier of sidewalk trees - a row of mature mahogany trees - with a canopy right at the level of any possible signs. The Curiosity Place, with its entrance at 90 degrees from the museum has a clearly-demarcated entrance in the building design the museum cannot replicate. It was suggested that the street-level windows be 'dressed' to attract attention from the street and entice them with a glimpse of current and coming exhibits. This would be a productive way to begin to attract attention and increase at least subliminal understanding of just what the museum is. Engaging a way finding consultant will be important for handling this street presence issue.

Education

The department produces a comprehensive quarterly report that should be shared much more widely as evidence of good hard work and public response to outreach and programming.

Outreach

Even with too few staff the Museum is diligent in identifying, attracting, and managing audiences outside the museum, either to bring them to the museum or to take the museum to them. Outreach is time consuming, but a very effective approach that brings in guests now, or in the future, and builds stronger relationships while providing feedback. Targeted outreach, with careful measurement of successes and failures, will help prioritize these activities. Begin with direct hit – speak with the cruise lines to plan lasting connections that will bring every cruise participant to the museum as they unload nearby.

School Groups

This is an important revenue source and mission-based practice for the museum. The coordinator is actually funded by the county – a third funding entity for the organization – and allows for some flexibility in acquiring supplies and materials, and for providing a more stable source of support for this staff position. Because of the many dedicated funding streams for various positions, if there is not already a written agreement or reporting process, then I would recommend creating one that identifies the funding source, the relationships, the allocation process, and how it matches with other funding allocations at the museum and the performance review processes.

The school programs are clearly and appropriately aligned with all levels of curriculum guidelines a school might require. There is good descriptive material on the programs and an active evaluation process for programs. I had only a brief few moments to speak with the education intern, but I had heard of her and her good work through many other staff members. She is working on educational design for the Museum and is engaged, curious, and committed. She brings training and the gift of added professional time to an important project for the museum.

The education team is cohesive and positive, and known for achieving a great deal with too few staff. They would be helped in their efforts by an advisory group to act as advocates', technical advisors, and promoters to the schools in a manner that would continually improve program quality but especially increase school group participation. It would have the added effect of increasing the museum's personal connections and visibility throughout the Gotham area.

Recommendations:

Short-term

- Engage a talented way finding consultant to create a visual identify from the street, plus appropriate maps, graphics, and guidance tools within the museum to help all users understand the layout.
- Engage the education team early on in exhibit design so that it can provide input from teachers and other audience representatives for content delivery
- The education team must continue to share its achievements with the board and all staff so that it is adequately recognized for its outreach and service
- The education team must advocate for itself more confidently by asking to participate early in planning
- Continue the practice of engaging interns for professional support
- Work with area arts and culture groups to use the oil spill crisis to attract would-be beach-goers to city-based attractions instead

Mid-term

- After undergoing the CMAP for Collections Stewardship, apply for a Community Engagement MAP assessment to examine audience engagement and to help address many of the public perception concerns.
- Consider developing a school program advisory group that will engage school representatives to design content and increase their commitment to choosing the museum for school visits
- Find ways to capture cruise ship visitors through direct partnerships and special programs responsive to their interests and timeframes

Collection Stewardship

Characteristics of excellence that relate to Collections Stewardship, according to [National Standards and Best Practices for U.S. Museums](#), include: "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 conducts collections-related research according to appropriate scholarly standards; the museum strategically plans for the use and development of its collections; and, guided by its mission, the museum provides public access to its collections while ensuring their preservation."

The collections department fulfills this standard though some collections processes, which in the absence of a curator, merit review in a Collections Stewardship MAP. The collections department is in the unfortunate situation of having no curator and no historian. The exhibit manager is doing double duty as curator of collections, and the research historian is doing double duty as the curator of history. Both are very enthusiastic about their jobs and committed to keeping up the quality of their performance even when down by 50% in staff. However the museum risks developing serious backlogs in the library and the archives and perhaps even in collections management if this is not immediately addressed. The collections department's five-year plan has specific focus areas and is ready for a more detailed update for 2016 – 2020 to reflect the detail of the 2015 plan. The staff is tackling cataloguing backlogs and appears to be meeting goals and making solid, important progress.

The leadership – staff and volunteer - greatly values the Exhibitions Curator and rightly so because he is very talented and achieves a great deal even with very few staff. However, this situation has the effect of potentially alienating other

staff and inhibiting objectivity. It's common under any circumstances to overlook concerns because of great relief in results. However, in upholding professional standards results are not the only measure. The Exhibitions Curator is being tasked with functioning in an additional professional area – Collections Management – not his expertise, and this could lead directly and indirectly to devaluing important professional collections practice procedures, particularly security, access, inventory, location, and recordkeeping practices that are the chain of accountability and are critical for eventual Accreditation. Expediency can be an enemy of accountability, and in stressful times accountability becomes even more valuable.

Collection storage

Onsite the museum has an impressive storage area with compactors, a loading dock, a processing area, and an objects work area. The registrar's office is located within the work area but would be more appropriately located in an adjoining empty office than in the immediate workspace. Access to the collections section was not locked and does not appear to be on a regular basis. This should be corrected. Exhibitions and curatorial staff have offices behind the section door that should be locked, and this might be a consideration in leaving it unlocked, but it is not appropriate.

I did not visit offsite storage. The collections segmented in the three other locations have varying degrees of significance and one would assume then varying frequency of access. Collections access and procedures offsite are as important as those onsite and should be adhered to aggressively. Staff expressed an interest in all collections storage and collections offices being co-located offsite. As desirable as this is in many ways, even if it becomes possible, I fear it would contribute to communication problems and tendencies to work in silos rather than as cross-museum teams.

Recommendations:

Short-term

- Hire an experienced collections leader as immediately as restructuring or new funding allows. This is a mission-critical function that cannot continue unfilled by the appropriate professional. IMLS offers funding for temporary collections positions through the Museums for America program.
- Increase intra- and inter-departmental communication and collegiality based on shared goals that transcend differing work styles

Mid-term

- Apply for the Collections Stewardship MAP in fall 2016 for 2017
- Apply to NEH for the May deadline for Professional Assistance Grants to fund the department's Disaster Tubs. This \$6,000 grant does not require a match.

Long-term

- Consolidate collections storage in one location

Note to All

This is a marvelous organization with many options for its next-step decisions for status-quo or success. My best wishes in your pursuit of success.

I would be remiss in my area of professional expertise if I did not counsel you to add environmental sustainability to your museum practice. As the earthquake crisis has threatened you, and your community struggles with what I believe is a false conundrum: economy or environment, it is reasonable to consider a theme of Valuing Gotham. By Valuing Gotham the museum can appreciate Gotham's economic history, present and future AND the importance of a healthy environment to the economic and social past, present and future. From double-sided printing at all times (saving paper which means saving money and environmental resources) to an energy audit and cost-effective green exhibit practices, environmentally sustainable practices can conserve resources the museum needs on many levels, while sending a message of care for Gotham on many levels: city funds and the community's living environment. The Douglas exhibit is an excellent start. This subtheme will not connect you to all communities, but it will respect all communities and provide some new connections while conserving your limited resources.

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.