

Museum Trustee Association Case Studies in Museum Governance

Making Hard Choices

The Middlesex Museum, a small county historical society and museum in the county seat of Springfield, has a new executive director, Steven Robbins. Mr. Robbins has been working on the draft of the budget for the coming fiscal year, due to be presented at his first board meeting the following week. The Museum's budget last year was \$400,000. He is facing a difficult decision. The grants for two educational programs begun under his predecessor, Pam Stewart, are ending in the next few months. The programs each need \$12,000 to \$15,000 to continue and fundraising to replace the grant funds have been unsuccessful. The Museum received a \$14,000 bequest for educational programming that could be used to cover the costs of one of the two. The director of education couldn't make a recommendation about which to keep and he can see why. "They both seem like great programs," he said to himself. "I guess I have to take it to the finance committee. I hate to be indecisive, but I also don't want to step on their toes. They've made it clear they want a detailed draft budget at their meeting."

The first program was TeenTeam, a teen docent program modeled on a successful program at a similar museum. The education director projects that after cutting the budget she could continue the program with \$15,000. Students from eight communities in the county are trained as gallery guides; the program has grown over the last three years, with teen docents returning year after year. Some of the first group are now in college and a few have returned as summer interns. The teens primarily give tours to youth groups from after school programs in Springfield, so there was a multiplier effect; 1200 youth were served directly or on tours last year. The young people clearly related better to the teenage volunteers than to adult docents. Ada Chace, a prominent local philanthropist, funded TeenTeam. The gift was explicitly "seed money" with the expectation that the program would find other funding or be self-sustaining after three years. Unfortunately, the after school programs have not been able to pay fees that would cover the program's costs. Ms. Chace is well known for being sticky about having her expectations met; it is likely that if the program is not continued, the museum won't get any donations from her for several years.

The second, Good Start, was a program for teen parents and their children, offered in partnership with the Springfield Public Library for the last five years. Twenty teen parents (mothers and fathers) and their children were enrolled each year. Supported by a \$12,000 annual grant from the Middlesex Community Foundation, the program has been subject to their strict "outcomes" assessment and the evaluation has been encouraging: parents have improved attendance in school and their children are more likely to do well in preschool. Springfield's mayor and the superintendent of schools both love the program and cite it as one of the best things the city does for at risk youth. The program had been recommended for continued funding, but when the town's largest employer was acquired by an out of state company that closed the Middlesex plant, the demands on the Community Foundation grew just as giving declined and Good Start's funding was cut. The Foundation promised to restore funding as soon as possible, which they estimated would be in 12 to 15 months. Mr. Robbins noted that the education director talked to the library and the superintendent about the financial crunch; they too were counting on Community Foundation funding.

Steve Robbins called Fred Reilly, the treasurer, who chaired the finance committee, and summarized what he saw as the pros and cons. He was surprised that Mr. Reilly seemed unfamiliar with either program or with the failed development efforts. "Pam really never brought us this level of detail," he explained. "Let me ask, what does each program cost per kid?" Mr. Robbins does some quick math. "TeenTeam costs \$12.50 a head; Good Start costs \$600 per family, but it's a more

extensive program; the families are with us once a week for seven months.” “Hmmm,” Mr. Reilly takes a moment to think. “I have one piece of advice: don’t get on the wrong side of the mayor. He’s the most powerful man in Middlesex County and he’s not afraid to use that power. He is term-limited and can’t run for re-election. I hear he has his eye on Congress. Fund that teen parent program.”

Mr. Robbins then called the chair of the development committee, Dorothy LaRosa, and repeated his report. When he said that development efforts for both projects seemed unsuccessful, Ms. LaRosa expressed surprise. “I gave the development assistant names of ten people who’d be great prospects for educational programs. Didn’t any of those pan out? I wish I’d known.” She continued, “Why did Pam take that project to Ada Chace in the first place? Never mind, it’s done, and we can’t afford to alienate her; she’s high on the prospect list for the technology overhaul. It’s the highest priority in the strategic plan, you know. Keep TeenTeam going, at least for another year.”

Mr. Robbins put the budget aside and pulled out the museum’s strategic plan. He knew that Pam Stewart was proud of the plan and the effort that had gone into it. There had been a strong committee with board members, senior staff, key volunteers, and community members. When she resigned, just as it was completed, she said in her letter of resignation, “I leave confident that the Middlesex Museum is on the right path, with a clear sense of direction, thanks to everyone’s hard work on the plan.” The letter was right there, inside the front cover of the plan, perhaps as a reminder to her successor. The plan opened with the restated mission:

Believing that a deeper appreciation of the County’s history and cultures can prepare its citizens for the future, the Middlesex Museum contributes to the well-being of its community and enhances the quality of life in the region.

Teens were identified as a primary target audience in the strategic plan; the two programs were highlighted as success stories with objectives to expand both. There was also a section on use of new technologies, also in part designed to appeal to young people. “I don’t have anything against teenagers, but why an emphasis on that age group?” Mr. Robbins wondered. Forging strategic partnerships with community organizations was another prominent goal, including the public schools, community centers, and the library. “No tie-breaker there,” he moaned. He did not disagree with what he read, but he wasn’t finding it very useful either.

Mr. Robbins sensed this was becoming a test of his leadership and his relationship with the board. He knew his next call should be to the president of the board. He was collecting his thoughts when the phone rang. It was the president, Jean Diamond, who had just gotten off calls from both Mr. Reilly and Ms. LaRosa. “Hear you’re having a bit of a problem with that budget,” Ms. Diamond said. “Let’s talk about it.”

Steve Robbins took a deep breath. “OK, here’s the issue. Or issues... I find myself weighing one successful program against another. We have to decide when something gets folded into the operating budget and when we’ll only continue it as long as we have grant money or we’ll never have a sustainable organization. How do we evaluate what’s successful and what’s not? And how are we going to set priorities and make choices when the money gets tight? There are so many points of view – the board, the staff, the funders, the politicians, the community, the audience – how do we take all those opinions into account? Has the board had these discussions? Is there policy?” As he finished, Steve Robbins wondered: As a new director, had he questioned the board’s practices too sharply? Or had he appeared indecisive? “Well, those are the big questions,” he said, forcing a laugh. “The immediate problem is balancing the budget with less money than we had last year.”

“Well, that’s a good place to start,” said Ms. Diamond, “let’s talk about how to begin and who needs to be part of the discussion.”

Disputed Property

One month ago, the Foster Art Museum, a mid-sized museum in a small city with a diverse population, opened "On Four Legs," an exhibition of depictions of animals from many cultures, specifically designed to attract a wide audience. Among the objects in the exhibit is a carved goat from central Africa that has not been previously exhibited. Last week, Dr. Karen Davis, a professor of anthropology at a local university, was quoted on the front page of the *Foster Times* saying the goat was looted; her evidence, collected over the last month, is quite convincing.

Response in the African American community was swift and heated, calling for the museum to remove the object from the exhibit immediately and return it to the country of origin's national museum. A small picket line was set up yesterday; more pickets are planned for the weekend. Several African American community leaders who have supported the museum in the past have declined to comment publicly, but have privately expressed their extreme displeasure to the director and chair of the board. On the other hand, in a sidebar to the article about the pickets, a sampling of reactions from museum visitors included a range of opinions, including one who said, "Really, everything in the museum was stolen at some point." The editor of the paper has agreed to hold off an editorial censuring the museum until the end of the week to give the museum time to respond.

Last week, the museum director, Fran Stevenson, issued a brief statement saying, "The museum has made examination of the claim its highest priority" and while it did not remove the object from display the label on the goat was changed, noting Dr. Davis' research. No one else has spoken to the press on the instructions of Ms. Stevenson and Ed Stein, the president of the board, although one board member told Mr. Stein, "If the board screws this up, I'll be the first to call the editor of the paper. I'm not going down with this ship. I have to do business in this town."

Today there's an emergency joint meeting of the board of directors and the collections committee. Mr. Stein opens the well-attended meeting by asking that Ms. Stevenson to share with the board the staff's research into the goat's history and provenance. She begins with some background; because of term limits, none of the current members was on the board eight years ago when the museum completed an assessment of its collections and their appeal to the community. The assessment revealed that much of the community was not very interested in the collections of European and American art. In the strategic plan that followed, the museum made a commitment to diversifying the collection. The curator of the Japanese print collection, Lisa Bedford, was charged with building a collection of art from Africa and South America. Feeling she lacked sufficient background, she assembled an advisory committee of collectors, dealers and scholars.

Everyone was pleased when Michael Ross, a former member of the board and collections committee, agreed to serve on the advisory committee. His collection of African and Asian art was considered quite fine and as a board member he had always been generous with his time, expertise and financial support. Ms. Bedford relied heavily on Mr. Ross in those first years: he introduced her to dealers, accompanied her to exhibitions and sales, and suggested books for the curatorial library. His gift of the goat was one of the first African pieces the museum acquired.

Now, looking back at the records, Ms. Stevenson reports that the provenance is sketchy; Mr. Ross did not provide much documentation of how or when he acquired the piece; they relied on Mr. Ross' word. She also notes that the collections records are, in general, incomplete and frustrating to use. The chair of the collections committee reminds the board that funds to automate the catalogue have been cut from last two budgets. A new member of the board asks why the committee didn't ask for a complete report before it voted on the gift. The committee chair is chagrined but defends the committee: "It was a gift from Mike Ross for pete's sake; we weren't going to look a gift horse

in the mouth!” Another collections committee member chimed in: “We’ve all been to his house and seen that collection. He hasn’t decided where it’s going yet; we’d love to get it for the Foster.”

The treasurer asks what the value of the piece might be. Ms. Stevenson responds that preliminary research suggests \$1,000 to \$2,000. A board member observes, “That’s a pittance for such a fuss; we’ve already spent more than that on staff time. We should just give the thing back and stop wasting time and money.” More than one member observes that such an action would set a bad precedent. “What if the next time the challenge is over a \$100,000 painting?” asks one. “I checked out this national museum on the web. It’s tiny! Do they want this? Can they take care of it?” asks another. Someone asks, “Is this sacred, an offering of some kind, or just a sculpture?”

The chair of the governance committee flips open his notebook and says, “It doesn’t matter. We have an ethics statement that says...” He pauses while he searches for the right section...

“Acquisitions shall come with clear title and shall not knowingly involve illicit trade. There shall be due diligence in acquisition research and gift solicitations to ensure that objects are acquired in a manner that is legal, ethical, and respectful of the rights, customs and beliefs of individual and cultures from which they originate.”

“While you have your notebook open, can you read us the mission statement that came out of planning?” asked another member.

“Sure, it’s right here... *The Foster Art Museum promotes the enjoyment and understanding of the world’s diverse cultures through the visual arts. It is a vital partner in the educational and cultural life of Foster, providing a forum for community dialogue.*”

The chair of the education committee, the only African American member of the board, opens her notebook. “Let’s look at the rest of the strategic plan. Community engagement is a big part of that plan and frankly, we can’t point to much success. We had a lot riding on this exhibit. We’re using it to pilot our outreach efforts.” Ms. Stevenson adds, “And we’re applying to Foster Bank and Trust to support full scale outreach to community youth centers next year.”

The former president of the board, one of the museum’s largest donors, leans back in his chair and asks, “Has anyone thought of calling Mike Ross and getting *his* side of the story? I called him this morning at his place in Maine. He couldn’t believe no one from the museum had called. He’s got a bill of sale right in his desk in his office from a dealer in Brussels. We should just ask him to get his secretary to fax it over and put an end to all this foolishness.”

The board rather quickly polarizes into two camps: those arguing that the museum should take the piece off exhibit and announce its intention to return it to Africa and those dismissing the claims of Dr. Davis and arguing that it would do more harm to admit guilt, perhaps erroneously, and embarrass a generous and loyal donor.

Ms. Stevenson waits for a lull and notes, “I realize there are two points of view, but we’re all working towards the same goal here; is there any common ground?”

Mindful of the newspaper editor’s deadline and the threatened picket line, Ed Stein repeats Fran Stevenson’s question to himself: is there anything the board could agree on? He wants to end the meeting with a plan to move forward. What should that plan include? Can it address the conflicting concerns of all the stakeholders?