



APPROVED Minutes
Quarterly Board of Trustees Meeting
Forum
2500 West Broad Street

January 16, 2025
3 p.m.

Present: Dr. Denise Walters, Cristina Ramirez, David Mills, Patricia Nicoson, Gina Burgin, Fran Bradford, Dr. Irma Becerra, Thomas Gottwald, Ram Venkatachalam, Jeff Bentley, Amishi Amin, Dr. Robert Winn.

Staff: Rich Conti, Courtney Moyer, Ash Harris, Timshel Purdum, Martha Quinn, MJ Benson, and Ada Sue Siler.

Other Attendees: Lauren Coleman, Office of the Attorney General; Elena Edwards, Science Museum of Virginia Foundation President

Welcome and Approval of Minutes

Mr. Mills, Board Chair, called the meeting to order at 3 p.m. and verified a quorum was present.

Mr. Mills asked the Trustees to review the October 17, 2024, meeting minutes. Mr. Venkatachalam suggested one minor edit. Ms. Bradford called a motion to approve the minutes with noted amendment. Dr. Becerra called the second. Mr. Mills called for a vote to approve the minutes as amended which passed unanimously without objection.

Mr. Conti introduced Lauren Coleman as a new Attorney General representative assigned to the Science Museum.

Director's Report

Mr. Conti shared the following:

- A recent Sub Rosa lecture at Sunrise Science attracted over 600 attendees, demonstrating strong public engagement.
- The Science Museum continues to emphasize efforts to stay ahead of routine and long-term maintenance.
- Notable design and development projects are underway, including updates to the East Green, a new restaurant, the *Orbit* exhibition, an expanded Animal and Eco Lab, and enhancements to the Level 1 main staircase entrance.
- Staffing remains a critical focus, accounting for 66% of the budget. The Science Museum is actively rebuilding its workforce and striving to remain competitive in the market despite compensation challenges. New talent has already been successfully onboarded.
- The budget gap for construction of the Northern Virginia Science Center was filled through an additional \$9 million in funding in the Governor's budget. Building permit drawings have been approved and the Office of the Attorney General has completed its contract review.
- Exhibits for the Northern Virginia Science Center will be privately funded. An upcoming Board meeting may potentially be relocated to Northern Virginia in October, offering an opportunity to observe the project's progress.

Dr. Winn inquired about the 10% increase in attendance, seeking clarification on its composition and the reasons for the growth. Mr. Conti responded that school groups play a significant role in the increase. Dr. Winn also raised concerns about potential financial turbulence at the state level that could impact the Science Museum. Mr. Conti reassured him, emphasizing that the Science Museum is not a political entity and enjoys widespread public support.

Mr. Mills acknowledged that while a change in state administration is forthcoming, the institution is respected by both political parties, and there is currently substantial one-time funding available. He highlighted that hosting the General Assembly at the Science Museum in 2021 fostered goodwill among stakeholders.

Ms. Bradford noted that feedback in the Science Museum galleries has been overwhelmingly positive. Ms. Bradford expressed interest in holding the October meeting at the Northern Virginia Science Center site.

Operations Report

Mr. Harris provided the following updates:

- Between July and December 2024, special event rentals generated a gross revenue of \$370,366, with \$7,000 from birthday parties and \$363,366 from facility rentals.
- Special events performed strongly due to the installation of LED walls and enhanced Wi-Fi in the DGC, which increased revenue.
- Birthday parties were reintroduced with a simplified and more manageable hosting model.
- Enterprise operations recorded \$259,023 in merchandise revenue, \$87,215 from the café, and \$64,815 from concessions.
- Enterprise revenues were on par with the previous year, while café and concession sales rose by 7%.
- The Science Museum emphasized proactive maintenance to balance guest experience with facility upkeep. Updates planned included smoke detector and suppression system upgrades, increased EV charging stations, roof resealing, electrical switchgear replacements, *LightPlace* glass roof modifications, and elevator upgrades.
- A third-party contractor, Beansprouts, is expected to join in the spring-summer period, to operate the café.

Ms. Bradford inquired whether new housing developments were impacting attendance. Mr. Harris confirmed that Laser Show attendance had increased due to population growth in the area.

Mr. Vencatachalam asked about pricing for larger events, to which Mr. Harris noted that weddings and conventions are the primary revenue generators.

Mr. Mills introduced Elena Edwards, Science Museum of Virginia Foundation President and acknowledged her significant contributions to the Foundation. Mr. Mills also highlighted the timely preparations for the Science Museum's 50th anniversary celebrations in 2027.

Foundation Update

Ms. Edwards shared the following:

- The ongoing collaboration between Trustee and Foundation Boards strengthens relationships and helps coordinate efforts.
- The Foundation has adjusted its meeting routines, boosting attendance and involvement from the Board of Directors.
- The Foundation remains committed to supporting the Science Museum's mission, promoting inclusivity, and sparking curiosity.
- Martha Quinn was introduced as the new Chief Development Officer.

- The Foundation Board of Directors is now divided into three teams with specific FY25 goals:
 - Individual Team:
 - Clarify expectations for annual giving and fundraising
 - Support internal readiness initiatives, including a database audit and revising materials for the Science Museum's 50th anniversary
 - Collaborate with the Marketing team on donor-centric activities
 - Engage in quarterly meetings with the Foundation team and work with the Events/Stewardship Team
 - Corporate Team:
 - Develop a five-year strategic partnership plan
 - Create corporate communication materials
 - Identify corporate prospects and strengthen current partnerships through meetings and strategy sessions
 - Cultivation and Stewardship Team:
 - Support major community projects, including the 50th anniversary and a reimagined Up & Atom event in April 2025
 - Organize Green donor cultivation dinners
 - Collaborate with the Liaison Committee to convert members to donors and incorporate museum content into stewardship activities
- Trustees were encouraged to participate as "doers, donors, and door-openers" to support the Foundation's efforts and introduce new leads.

Mr. Mills requested that committee leads share their contact information with Trustees, and Ms. Burgin inquired about additional opportunities for Trustee involvement. Ms. Edwards indicated that there are ongoing engagements with corporate partners and individual cultivation efforts. Trustees were reminded to save April 30 for the Up & Atom fundraising event.

Finance Committee Report

Ms. Burgin reviewed the following:

- Angela Wright was hired as the new Director of Finance.
- The Science Museum recently completed a routine APA audit and is currently undergoing a routine DOA review.
- Efforts are ongoing to identify and improve operational processes.
- A review of the Trustee summary indicated that the Science Museum is in a strong financial position, with revenues ahead of budget and expenses tracking as expected.

- Rental income is expected to stabilize upon receiving payment from the city for field usage, although health insurance costs have increased.

Ms. Bradford inquired whether the Governor allocated additional funding for operating costs. Mr. Conti responded that the focus is on addressing the funding needed for Northern Virginia Science Center construction. Mr. Conti emphasized that the Science Museum maintains strong capital reserves.

Ms. Burgin questioned whether the current financial reserves would have mitigated the challenges faced during the COVID-19 closure. Mr. Conti explained that at that time, the Science Museum operated with a small team and received Federal funding, which helped navigate the organization through the pandemic.

Ms. Burgin presented the proposed Trustee Discretionary Fund (TDF) transfers.

Resolution #001-2025

Approval to allocate funds for marketing needs, guest research and leadership training.

It is the responsibility of the Board of Trustees to approve all transfers from the Trustee Discretionary Fund. Management is requesting the following actions:

- Allocation of \$150,000 to support advertising to increase awareness and drive attendance to the summer 2025 touring exhibition, *Ultimate Dinosaurs*.
- Allocation of \$50,000 to create collateral and purchase advertising to increase awareness and help increase sales of Science Museum special event rentals.
- Allocation of \$8,000 to implement new guest research surveys designed to gauge guest satisfaction and identify areas for improvement.
- Allocation of \$50,000 for leadership training and coaching for executive, senior and informal leaders within the agency focused on transformative leadership to drive personal and organizational growth.

Ms. Burgin called for questions. None heard. Ms. Burgin called for a motion to approve the TDF transfer as presented. Dr. Becerra called the motion to approve the transfer, which was seconded by Dr. Walters. Ms. Burgin called for a vote, which passed unanimously without objection. Motion carried.

Ms. Moyer then reviewed attendance and upcoming programming.

- The Science Museum reported strong attendance figures for the October to December period, totaling 119,900 in visitation, a 2.6% increase compared to the previous year.
- Year-to-date attendance stands at 277,985, representing a 10.7% increase over the previous year.
- Group visitation has been particularly robust, with a year-to-date total of 38,120 visitors, marking a 46.6% increase compared to last year.
- Bookings for January through May currently stand at 30,524, indicating continued growth in group attendance.
- Pre-bookings for the spring and summer seasons suggest that this positive trend will persist.
- The Science Museum hosted seven Laser Shows which attracted 1,512 attendees and generated \$28,674 in revenue.
- Upcoming shows will feature David Bowie and Beyoncé, with plans to incorporate family-friendly offerings into The Dome schedule.
- The Model Railroad Show drew 11,220 in visitation, a 10% year-over-year decrease. However, member attendance increased by 5% to 38% of total attendance. The event generated \$107,675 in total revenue, representing an 8.5% year-over-year decline. It was noted that the ideal attendance range for balancing crowd size and quality experience is between 11,000 and 12,000 guests.
- Upcoming exhibitions and films include:
 - Garner Gallery
 - *Towers of Tomorrow with LEGO® Bricks*: February 1–August 24, 2025
 - *Power of Poison*: tentative October 4, 2025–April 12, 2026
 - *Science Unplugged*: May 8, 2026–July 3, 2026
 - *Rescue*: July 13, 2026–January 17, 2027
 - Dewey Gottwald Center
 - *Ultimate Dinosaurs*: May 31–September 1, 2025
 - *Survival of the Slowest*: May 23–September 7, 2026
 - The Dome
 - *Wings Over Water*: Opened October 1, 2024
 - *Superhuman Bodies*: Opened November 1, 2024
 - *Dinosaurs of Antarctica*: March 1, 2025

During the discussion, Ms. Amin inquired about the cost of hosting events. Ms. Moyer explained that events vary on cost to execute. Laser Shows are cost-effective due to a package of 10 laser programs and a small crew, which allows for revenue generation. In contrast, the Model Railroad Show incurs higher expenses. Ms. Bradford asked whether

Laser Show revenue includes food and beverage sales, to which Ms. Moyer confirmed that it does.

Education Committee Report

Dr. Walters highlighted the following:

- The Science Museum continues extensive efforts to engage diverse audiences of all ages and abilities.
- The Laser Shows continue to be impressive and entertaining for guests.
- Group and school attendance has increased by 46% compared to the previous year, and volunteer contributions have reached over 2,135 hours, marking a 31% increase.
- Key programming highlights included:
 - Science After Dark: Spooky Science: Attracted 2,000 guests, with 57% being members.
 - Sunrise Science: Featuring Dr. Kartik Sheth from NASA attracted 122 guests; the Sunrise Science program has welcomed nearly 900 guests since its inception.
- Minds of All Kinds drew 331 guests, making it the most attended session to date.
- Exciting updates include the return of the Boost Kitchen to the programming docket and the introduction of "Bricks and Brews," an after-hours event for adults featuring LEGO activities and beer.
- A new teen leadership program begins its second semester this month, and an IMLS grant proposal has been submitted.
- Additionally, the Science Museum has launched a pilot program with VCU's theater department and plans to host Well Made, a two-day artisan and maker festival featuring crafters from across Virginia in the fall.
- Upcoming events include:
 - January 24: Minds of All Kinds
 - January 27: Summer camp registration opens
 - February 1: GLOW
 - February 4: Senior Making
 - February 8: Teacher Resource Fair
 - February 21: Science on Tap: Mystery at the Museum
 - March 6: Laser Show: Bowie
 - March 12: Senior Morning
 - March 14: Science After Dark: Everything is Awesome
 - March 21: Curiosity Camp-In
 - April 4: Minds of All Kinds
 - April 10: Laser Show: Beyoncé
 - April 19: Earth Day Festival

Dr. Walters encouraged all Trustees to participate in at least one upcoming Science Museum event to support and engage with the institution's dynamic programming.

Delegation of Authority

Mr. Mills reviewed the terms of the Delegation of Authority for the Agency Director, Rich Conti, which reads:

The Board hereby delegates to the Director full responsibility for the leadership, operation, maintenance, and management of all aspects of the Science Museum of Virginia under the general direction of the Board of Trustees. This includes, but is not limited to: development of policies, programs, and activities; implementation of policy, planning, and strategy, including but not limited to those involving Science Museum expansion and construction projects; management of all programs and activities; budget management; and management and supervision of all staff and volunteers.

Further, the Board hereby delegates its lawful authority to negotiate and execute contracts and other documents, including but not limited to leases and easements, on behalf of the Museum to the Director, under the general direction of the Board of Trustees, in accordance with the laws and policies of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Mr. Mills called for a motion to approve the Delegation of Authority as presented. Ms. Nicoson called the motion to approve, which was seconded by Dr. Winn. A vote was taken, which passed unanimously. The motion carried.

By-Laws and proposed changes

Lauren Coleman from the Attorney General's office, specifically in the Education section, outlined her role in supporting various initiatives.

She emphasized the need to update the organization's By-Laws with several essential changes. A high-level overview of the proposed revisions included an update made in July 2024 to the electronic meeting policy requirements. The policy consists of three main components:

1. Electronic participation will now allow disabled individuals to be counted as physically present for quorum purposes.
2. Virtual meetings will be permitted up to two times or 50% of the meetings per year.
3. The Code requires boards to vote on the policy and By-Laws annually.

New Business

Mr. Mills proposed the idea of incorporating a dinner or social event into the Board day calendar and sought feedback. He thanked Dr. Walters for building a strong Board and emphasized the importance of cultivating strong relationships with local officials, especially as the Science Museum continues to develop the Richmond campus and the Northern Virginia Science Center. Mr. Mills suggested that a cocktail hour or dinner could be an effective way to foster these relationships. He inquired about the Board's interest in this proposal.

Ms. Bradford expressed support for the idea and mentioned that this approach is not unusual, as many other museums host similar social events. She proposed a trade-off, suggesting that one Board meeting per year could be held virtually. Mr. Vencatchalam also supported the idea, believing it could bring new participation and support from outside the norm. Mr. Bentley agreed that such social events are common for other boards and emphasized that it could be an opportunity for better Board member connections.

Mr. Conti asked the Northern Virginia members whether they would prefer the social event the evening before or after the Board meeting. Mr. Bentley preferred to have everything on one day, with the social event following the meeting. Mr. Mills mentioned that a budget is available to cover such events. Mr. Conti proposed a schedule of April in Richmond, June as a virtual meeting, and potentially October in Northern Virginia. Dr. Walters agreed that a virtual meeting in June would be practical due to summer travel.

Mr. Mills asked for any other new business.

Dr. Winn raised the idea of how the Science Museum can align and support other key entities in the STEM field to help bolster general support for STEM. Many Board members offered ideas or options in the impromptu brainstorming session.

Adjournment

With no additional new business heard, Ms. Bradford made a motion to adjourn the meeting, which was seconded by Ms. Ramirez. Mr. Mills called for a vote which passed unanimously without objection. The meeting was adjourned at 4:42 p.m.

The next meeting will be on April 17, 2025.