



APPROVED Minutes
Quarterly Board of Trustees Meeting
The Discovery Room & Forum
2500 West Broad Street

April 17, 2025
1:30 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, Karey Malyszko, Kate Hight

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; Martha Quinn, Science Museum of Virginia Foundation; Russ Reeder, Northern Virginia Science Center Foundation; Chris Powell, Northern Virginia Science Center Foundation; Nene Spivy, Northern Virginia Science Center Foundation; Acacia McKenna, Liaison Committee; Hank Coleman, Science Museum of Virginia Foundation; Steve Holdych, Science Museum of Virginia Foundation; Dr. John O'Bannon, Science Museum of Virginia Foundation; Kelley McCall, Science Museum of Virginia Foundation; Tom Benedetti, Science Museum of Virginia Foundation; Josh McCreadie, Science Museum of Virginia Foundation; Scott Aronson, Science Museum of Virginia Foundation; Bob Feeser, Science Museum of Virginia Foundation; John Wick, Science Museum of Virginia Foundation; Pat Hackler, Liaison Committee; Elizabeth Dolan Wright, Science Museum of Virginia Foundation; Lawson Wijesooriya (dinner only); and Mayor Danny Avula (dinner only).

Welcome and Approval of Minutes

Mr. Mills, Board Chair, called the meeting to order at 1:35 p.m. and verified a quorum was present. Mr. Mills reviewed the agenda and changes to the standard meeting format.

Mr. Mills asked the Trustees to review the January 16, 2025, meeting minutes. Ms. Nicoson called a motion to approve the minutes with noted amendment. Ms. Burgin called the second. Mr. Mills called for a vote to approve the minutes as presented which passed unanimously without objection.

Director's Report

Mr. Conti shared the following:

- The various committee reports have been consolidated into a single report.
- As preparations continue for the 50th anniversary, there is an emphasis on celebration and maintaining flexibility.
- Approximately 2,000 guests were recorded yesterday. A total of 60,000 guests were reported for the month of March. Overall attendance figures continue to be impressive, with an 8% increase in revenue.
- Group attendance doubled in the month of March compared to last fiscal year. Most available dates are fully booked.
- Revenue has increased by 16% compared to the previous year, while expenses have decreased by 0.7%. There is no intention to build up a large cash reserve.
- Northern Virginia Science Center, including Nene Spivey, Chris Powell, and Russ Reeder, are engaged in planning for future developments.
- A construction contract for the Northern Virginia Science Center was signed on March 3, followed by a press release on March 10, and a construction launch party held on March 31. The upcoming steps involve finalizing the scope of the exhibit and refining operational strategies.

Ms. Falls inquired about how far students travel for visits. Ms. Purdum explained that outside of Central Virginia, the majority of field trips come from the Hampton Roads area and Northern Virginia, while there are fewer visits from Southwest Virginia. Dr. Walters commented that the opening of the Northern Virginia Science Center may reduce the number of student groups traveling from Northern Virginia to Richmond for visits.

Ms. Burgin raised concerns about parking, noting that on busy days guests are required to park in higher levels on the parking deck. She questioned how parking would be managed as guest numbers grow. Mr. Conti explained that overflow parking is available in the Terminal Lot and the Leigh St. Lot, and that for certain weekend events, the DMV lot across the street can be utilized. Ms. Burgin asked whether parking considerations were being addressed in the development of the East Green. Mr. Conti confirmed this and noted that two staff surface lots will be removed to make space for the East Green.

Ms. Falls asked whether the small lot near the DMV is reserved for staff, which was confirmed. Mr Harris added that parking availability tends to improve shortly after school groups leave, usually within 15 minutes.

By-Laws and proposed changes

Ms. Coleman from the Attorney General's office, reviewed the proposed changes to the By-Laws.

During the discussion, updates to the organization's bylaws were presented, reflecting new guidance issued by the Virginia General Assembly regarding electronic participation and virtual meetings. The proposed changes include incorporating the option for fully virtual meetings into the bylaws. It was noted that the Virginia Code requires the organization's electronic participation policy to be voted on annually.

The group reviewed the justification for electronic participation, emphasizing that members who wish to attend virtually must request approval in advance from the Board chair. Additionally, it was clarified that individuals with disabilities, or those caring for someone with a disability, may be counted toward the in-person quorum. The inclusion of fully virtual meetings will now be part of the regular meeting rotation, including committee meetings.

It was confirmed that the updated bylaws are now in full compliance with the revised Virginia Code. Ms. Coleman then opened the floor for questions regarding the bylaw changes, and Mr. Mills asked for any comments from the members. Hearing none, a motion to approve the changes was called by Dr. Walters, seconded by Ms. Ramirez, and carried unanimously with all members voting in favor.

The group then transferred from the Discovery Room to the Forum to join the Foundation Board of Directors for the joint meeting.

Mr. Conti reviewed the structure of the remaining meeting session. Three presentations will occur then the group will engage in strategic planning for developing a long-term vision and goals of the Science Museum. The aim is to dream big and continue developing the heart and soul of the Science Museum for the next 10-20 years.

Architecture Firm - Formal Restaurant Development and Thalhimer Pavilion

Danny MacNelly provided the following updates:

- The proposed restaurant will be located near the Garner Gallery and the area outside of the Dome.
- The plan includes the creation of a catering kitchen to support food service operations.
- An additional space will be developed, which may serve as either a meeting room or a private dining area.
- A well-designed courtyard is planned to enhance the overall ambiance of the restaurant area.
- The Science Museum is consulting with experienced restaurateurs while maintaining control over the project to ensure alignment with its institutional values.
- The design will feature a bar and a large covered outdoor space, aiming for an inviting atmosphere.
- A mockup of the outdoor space indicates the use of a light steel canopy and an open, airy design to create a bright and comfortable dining environment for both lunch and dinner.
- There is a proposal to relocate the existing exhibition space to Level 3, providing a new reason for guests to explore that area.
- The presentation also discussed the Thalhimer Pavilion train sheds, proposing the relocation of administrative offices to this area.
- This shift would free up space for expanded event areas, improved catering support, additional storage, and more flexible access to events.
- A new entrance would be added to provide a more elegant and welcoming access point for special events.
- The design may include flexible meeting room spaces and public restrooms, and potentially enclosing areas above the train sheds.
- Consideration will be given to the existing conditions of the train sheds to allow for both indoor and outdoor functional spaces.

During the discussion, Dr. Becerra raised a suggestion regarding incorporating flexible meeting spaces into the restaurant design. Ms. Falls added a question regarding the consideration of families, noting that many children visit with parents. Mr. MacNelly responded by explaining that the restaurant aims to balance a family-friendly environment during lunch hours, with a more elevated atmosphere for dinner.

Mr. Mills inquired about the seating capacity goals for the restaurant. Mr. MacNelly noted that the team is still deliberating on the final number. Dr. O'Bannon commented that the Science Museum already offers attractions that draw people in,

and Mr. Conti added that the restaurant is intended to serve as an additional amenity by providing a higher-quality food experience that discourages guests from leaving for fast food options. Mr. Benedetti asked whether the concept had been compared to the VMFA's restaurant. Mr. MacNelly clarified that their goal is to create an experience slightly more casual than Amuse to maintain accessibility.

Mr. Wick mentioned the importance of incorporating indoor and outdoor bar experiences. Ms. McCall stated that the goal should be to create a gathering place rather than just a destination. She emphasized using the train shed's flexible spaces to support educational objectives, and proposed incorporating a version of *The Forge* that focuses on environmental programming and awareness. Mr. Conti expressed a desire to blur the lines between indoor and outdoor areas. Dr. Walters added a suggestion to include a kitchen garden and emphasize on-site food sourcing, aligning with community science and food education.

Ms. Burgin asked if attendance from CMoR would impact the restaurant. Mr. MacNelly confirmed that this had been considered. Ms. Stein highlighted the potential for the flexible space to support the local startup ecosystem by providing a venue for networking and collaboration. Ms. Dolan Wright raised a concern that the general crowd might be better suited for grab-and-go options or the Bean Sprouts café. Mr. MacNelly acknowledged this and mentioned the possibility of incorporating food trucks in the East Green area.

Ms. Amin asked about finding an operator for the restaurant, and Mr. MacNelly noted that identifying the right partner will be a challenging but crucial step. Ms. Burgin asked whether the restaurant would share space with CMoR and whether guests would need admission to dine. Mr. MacNelly clarified that the restaurant would have a separate entrance. A question was also raised about how to prevent restaurant guests from accessing Science Museum spaces, to which Mr. MacNelly acknowledged that this issue still needs to be addressed.

Ms. Bradford asked if discussions were ongoing with CMoR, and Mr. Conti confirmed that meetings with CMoR are planned. Mr. Gottwald inquired about the restaurant branding, and Mr. Conti stated that the restaurant is intended to have its own distinct identity. Mr. Vancatachalam suggested a rotational food service model, where the menu changes and features cocktail pairings linked to science themes.

The discussion transitioned to a new topic, led by Tyler Silvestro with Marvel Architects, focused on the East Green.

Marvel - The East Green

Mr. Silvestro's presentation emphasized the importance of creating a sense of anticipation and curiosity for guests upon arrival at the Science Museum.

- The objective is to enhance this feeling of curiosity through the physical environment, encouraging engagement and discovery.
- Key guiding design factors were reviewed, including the site's geographic low point due to the natural slope of the land.
- Attendees were guided through a walkthrough of the East Green site to understand the scope and vision of the development.
- The vision includes creating an immersive, meandering space that encourages both activity and observation—a place to "see and be seen."
- The design prioritizes a vital and active ecological system, supported by sustainability efforts including stormwater management and a pump system.
- A rotating public art program is under consideration, with Mr. Conti expressing support for interactive art that can be physically engaged with by guests.
- The East Green includes a large, open area, and the design must account for heat mitigation, possibly through the inclusion of a shade structure and a water feature.
- Materials such as Petersburg granite and other storytelling elements are being considered to enhance the narrative and educational value of the space.
- Near the train shed entrance, the site features significant elevation changes, including grade drops that obstruct views toward the DMV, which will need to be addressed in the design plan.

Ms. Bradford opened the discussion by expressing her excitement about the project, emphasizing how stunning and impactful it is to have such a free and open public space within the city. She raised concerns regarding liability and the maintenance of the park. Mr. Silvestro responded by confirming that the park will be open to the public, with no intention of locking it at night. He acknowledged the liability considerations but reassured that safety is a priority and the park will not be designed in a way that creates danger.

Dr. Becerra inquired about irrigation needed in the space, and Mr. Silvestro explained that all plants will require irrigation at the outset, but they are working with a team to select a blend of grasses that, after two to three years, will become sustainable.

Mr. Hackney asked whether the lighting scheme for the new area would match the existing Green. Mr. Silvestro replied that the primary goal is to ensure the walking paths are adequately lit. Emily Hartman questioned the water source for the park features,

and Mr. Silvestro noted they are evaluating how much excess water can be captured and reused, but they will still need to supplement with fresh water.

Dr. Walters suggested that the areas with heavy planting could incorporate community science by involving volunteers. Ms. Burgin raised the issue of whether environmental features would expose the project to additional regulations and expenses. Mr. Silvestro reassured her that as long as housing is not included, the scope should be manageable, though certain permits will be necessary.

Mr. Silvestro explained that the next step in the process is to present the plan to the Art & Architectural Review Board, which will help clarify aspects such as water features. Ms. Stein asked about the inclusion of an outdoor greenhouse, to which Mr. Conti responded affirmatively, noting they plan to incorporate one where appropriate.

Mr. Mills asked about rentable spaces for events, and Mr. Silvestro confirmed there would be designated areas available for events accommodating groups of various sizes. Dr. Becerra asked whether exercise considerations had been taken into account. Mr. Silvestro replied that the park is designed to function as a resting or stop-in space for runners and joggers.

Mr. Mills also asked about future staffing needs, particularly at alternate entry locations once the park is operational. Mr. Conti confirmed that the East Green would require staff presence at times. Mr. Hackney asked about the design of the paths, and Mr. Silvestro explained they would use permeable and economical pavers.

Mr. Conti continued the discussion by stating that an estimated \$30M will be needed to support the two major projects. He explained that the Science Museum will be requesting funding from the state, although the full amount will require private support. Mr. Conti also noted that additional funds will be required to complete the build-out of exhibits associated with these projects.

Dr. O'Bannon inquired about the total size of the site, to which Mr. Conti responded that the campus encompasses 37 acres. Ms. McCall asked about the duration of the city lease on the field, and Mr. Conti explained that the first renewal period is in seven years, followed by two additional terms of 20 years each.

Ms. Burgin posed a question about how the \$30M project will be maintained over time. Mr. Conti acknowledged the importance of ongoing maintenance and affirmed that the organization is currently in a strong financial position. He expressed confidence in the agency's ability to sustain and maintain these projects, while also recognizing that additional operational funding from the state will be necessary in the future.

Education Vision

Ms. Purdum began the presentation by introducing the Science Museum of Virginia's approach to education, emphasizing that it is focused on informal education, which provides additional time and opportunities for learning.

- The Science Museum has developed an interactive interpretive plan called "THRIVE", which aims to empower Virginians to make informed decisions and apply science to improve the world around them.
- The educational philosophy is described as "Museum as a Verb," emphasizing active engagement through surprising and inspiring exhibits, playful social media tied to pop culture and unique live programming.
- The Science Museum programs a wide range of topics including early learning, astronomy, and school programs.
- The Science Museum is currently experiencing record-setting attendance, with over 1,000 students visiting in a single day.
- There is an increasing need to financially support field trip costs. Cost has become the primary factor in school field trip decision making.
- Eighteen percent of school trip revenue is currently supported by Foundation funding. The goal is for all Title I schools within a one-hour drive to receive free access to the Science Museum.
- The Science Museum offers teen and maker programs, including *The Forge*, an inclusive maker space open to all, and the MiX, a teen maker space, which is free for students.
- The Teen Leadership Program is another method of teen engagement, with the second cohort currently active. The first cohort supports and mentors the second group as they develop and implement agency programs and projects.
- The Science Within Reach initiative includes Mind of All Kinds, a sensory-friendly event; senior-focused programs, including birdwatching and nature-based engagement; and Museums for All, which provides discounted admission and membership for EBT cardholders.
- The Science Museum's community outreach has grown by 40% compared to last year, demonstrating increased external engagement.

Ms. Purdum concluded by sharing a video that highlighted the Science Within Reach initiative and invited feedback on what additional programs should be added, expanded, or incorporated into the Science Museum's offerings.

Ms. Ramirez expressed a desire to see inclusion of a quote from the Sacred Heart Center and Spanish-speaking communities. Mr. Vancatachalam inquired about the library pass program, to which Mr. Purdum responded that the Science Museum has partnered with local libraries to make membership passes available for checkout. Mr.

Vankatachalam also suggested incorporating a reading challenge incentive program, an idea further supported by Ms. Spivy, who referenced a similar program in Fairfax.

Mr. Hackney commended the promotional video, suggesting it be used as a fundraising tool. He recommended including metrics at the end to strengthen its impact. Following this, Mr. Conti encouraged the group to offer ideas and suggestions for enhancements to the Science Museum's educational programming.

Ms. McCall emphasized the need for coordination across initiatives and highlighted the importance of leveraging local talent pipelines and collaborations with organizations like RVATech. She proposed that establishing a “tech town” identity and addressing opportunity gaps could elevate the Science Museum’s educational profile.

Dr. Walters supported the idea of developing talent pipelines, emphasizing the excellent colleges in the area and the opportunity to foster stronger relationships with these institutions. Ms. Stein brought attention to the upcoming Up & Atom event, which aims to connect sponsors with both the current and next-generation workforce. She noted that the event would take a different direction this year.

Dr. Becerra shared that in Northern Virginia, the high density of colleges fosters competitive collaboration and suggested organizing a competitive event that would engage students across institutions statewide. Ms. McCall added that Virginia would soon be hosting a national debate competition, which could serve as a relevant example or partnership opportunity for the Science Museum.

Strategic Vision Planning

Mr. Conti invited the group to brainstorm and dream big on ideas for the future of the Science Museum.

Mr. Benedetti began the discussion by emphasizing the potential for the Science Museum to take ownership of Mars-related programming. Mr. Aronson supported this idea by proposing a collaborative business model that includes a digital network to position the region as a STEM leader. Ms. Bradford referenced NASA's summer program for high school students and suggested adopting a similar model, possibly through a multi-venue ticketing system, though Ms. Moyer noted that revenue sharing in such models can present logistical barriers.

Ms. Nicoson proposed using AI and virtual reality technologies to enhance experiences, while Mr. Conti cautioned that the Science Museum cannot compete with fully virtual entertainment venues. Ms. Stein introduced the idea of a subscription model, and Ms.

McCall suggested a hybrid approach with touring exhibitions that include both physical and virtual components. Mr. Mills highlighted Virginia's unique position for intentional growth in science education and called for a structured study to explore opportunities and partnerships over the next decade. Dr. O'Bannon stressed the importance of maintaining focus on the Science Museum's core mission and recommended evaluating risks and opportunities.

Dr. Walters pointed out the vast number of underserved communities in Virginia and proposed a program involving digital tools, travel, community colleges, and potentially an endowed position to reach rural areas. Dr. Becerra suggested leveraging Virginia's network of 27 private universities to create a hybrid educational model rooted in local communities. Mr. Wick endorsed adding a competitive element to these initiatives. Mr. Conti summarized the discussion as an opportunity to expand the Science Museum's reach and challenged the group to clearly define the problems they are aiming to solve.

Mr. Bentley emphasized that identifying the underlying problem is the most important task. Mr. Mills proposed a study to identify long-term opportunities. Mr. Bentley cautioned that the Science Museum must remain focused despite pursuing new projects. Ms. Edwards echoed this sentiment, crediting Mr. Conti's vision for recent progress and underlining the need to finish current projects before expanding further.

Mr. Mills added that if guest numbers continue to rise, the Science Museum will need more exhibition space, but he warned against overexpansion at the cost of mission clarity. Mr. Conti emphasized the need for consistently refreshed, relevant content. Ms. Moyer advocated for more flexible space to accommodate touring exhibitions. Ms. Quinn noted that while the Science Museum delivers a high-quality guest experience, it does so with a lean staff, and any expansion must consider staffing needs.

Ms. Bradford pointed out the importance of state politics in shaping the Science Museum's future, noting bipartisan support for science and education in the upcoming Governor's race. Dr. Walters remarked on the Science Museum's upcoming 50th anniversary, encouraging ambitious thinking for the next 50 years. Mr. Mills concluded that leadership from the Foundation is essential for these ambitions and reiterated the goal of making the Science Museum free for all Title 1 schools.

Ms. Spivy highlighted a \$25 million fundraising goal to expand flex space at the Northern Virginia Science Center, which includes significant outdoor areas. Mr. Reeder endorsed this expansion, emphasizing the potential impact on over 600,000 students within an hour's drive, many of whom attend Title 1 schools. He called for aligning missions to create meaningful change.

Foundation Report

Ms. Edwards highlighted the following:

- The joint session was enthusiastically received as an excellent opportunity to envision the future and engage the best minds in strategic planning.
- It was noted with pride that the Science Museum is now ranked as the number three science museum in the country.
- There is a continued focus on environmental initiatives, with confidence expressed in the Science Museum's current vision and direction.
- While state funding has been secured, questions were raised about whether the current level of support is sufficient and how to elevate the Science Museum's visibility within state priorities to secure additional funding.
- Emphasis was placed on strengthening government relations, particularly given the Science Museum's close proximity to the State Capitol.
- The Science Museum is seeking assistance in thoughtfully filling open board positions with strategic and capable individuals.

At 5 p.m. the group transitioned to *The Forge* for a guided, hands-on activity. At 6:15 p.m. the group moved to the NewMarket Plaza for dinner.

During dinner, Mr. Mills offered remarks regarding the exciting opportunity for the Science Museum to help shape the tenor of development of this city. The Science Museum will focus on being a responsible partner and community participant. Mr. Mills then introduced Mayor Danny Avula.

Mayor Avula offered words of thanks to the Board. Mayor Avula discussed stewardship and commended the Science Museum for its work. Midtown Green and the partnership between the Science Museum and the City is strong. The Science Museum's spacemaking efforts and sustainability focus is something to emulate. He noted that the Science Museum is a gem of the City.

Ms. Bradford asked Mayor Avula's favorite Richmond museum. He responded that the Science Museum is near and dear to him and his family. The Science Museum has been host to a number of important events during his service as Public Health Director.

Ms. Quinn mentioned the importance of STEM programming and asked for Mayor Avula's view on the integration into the STEM pipeline in education. He responded that he just came from a meeting with Richmond Public Schools where discussion centered on creating more career and technical education that clearly has a strong STEM component. The Chamber of Commerce and many business leaders in the City are

rallying alongside this initiative. There is also a focus on facilities and infrastructure that supports quality STEM learning.

Mr. Venkatachalam asked for input on the City's utilization of the training field at Midtown Green. Mayor Avula responded that the space is an interactive and flexible facility.

Mr. Wick asked for Mayor Avula's vision for Broad Street and how the Science Museum can tie into that. Mayor Avula stated that Broad Street needs attention and a clear direction. Broad Street had a vibrancy and vitality that was impacted by COVID and the protests around that time. Restoring that vitality is important. Current efforts include working with Venture Richmond to determine what small business owners need. Mayor Avula also commended on developments in Shockoe Bottom that preserve the history and heritage of the area.

Mr. Mills asked if there are any topics of interest that are not given the opportunity for discussion. Mayor Avula said that regionalism is often overlooked. There was an older notion that our area did not partner well with surrounding localities. However, as dynamics have changed and local relationships have improved, county partners have become much more interested in and engaged in regional conversations and investments. A prime example is Greater Richmond Transit.

Adjournment

With no additional new business heard, a motion was made to adjourn the meeting, which was seconded. Mr. Mills called for a vote which passed unanimously without objection. The meeting was adjourned at 8 p.m.

The next meeting will be held virtually on Wednesday June 18, 2025.