



Memorandum

To: Common Council

**CC: La Crosse Historic and Cultural Museum Planning Task Force
La Crosse Historic and Cultural Museum Planning Advisory Committee**

From: Tim Acklin, Planning Administrator

Date: October 19, 2021

Re: Report of La Crosse Historic and Cultural Museum Planning Task Force

In January 2018 the Common Council adopted a Resolution creating the La Crosse Historic and Cultural Museum Planning Task Force and a separate, non-voting advisory committee. Both committees were made up of community members representing various interests, organizations, and backgrounds with the desire and expertise to support the La Crosse County Historical Society in its effort to explore the potential for a destination museum.

The Planning Department introduced the committees to the concept of pattern writing and how it can be used in this process. Pattern writing is used to understand the relationship of human activity and how to best design the built environment for it. This process includes predesign, project programming, site evaluation. Schematic design, design development, and final documents. The Planning Department also stated the importance of establishing a critical path for the project that identifies a timeline and key steps in the process. These next steps included establishing a Vision Statement, Mission Statement, and goals for the Task Force. It also included data gathering which consisted of a literature review on developing museums, collecting stories (likes & dislikes) from both committees on their visits to museums, visiting several local archives and museums to understand what they do and current constraints, and visit three regional museums to talk with their staff and learn their history of how they got started.

Very early in the process several committee members asked about immediately looking for an existing historic building to use for the museum or watching for buildings to be put out on the market. Planning stated that it could certainly be an option but the Task Force has yet to determine what is needed, such as square footage, location, theme, etc.

It was also asked of the Planning Department what the City's role in the museum would be and who would operate it. Planning stated that the City has no intention of owning a museum, or a building to house one in. The City's desire is to help find the La Crosse County Historical Society a new home by

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creating something bigger that draws visitors from all over and provides them with a memorable experience. This would be determined by the efforts of the Task Force.

Vision Statement

Planning led the Task Force in a vision exercise that consisted of 6 questions that were designed to obtain aspirational, inspirational, and motivational responses on what they would like the end result of this process to be. Below is the statement that was developed and adopted based off of their responses.

"Engaging and Inspiring People of all ages with a Memorable La Crosse Area Historical Experience"

Mission Statement

Planning also led the Task Force in a mission statement exercise. A mission statement is a short statement of an organization or group's purpose. Below is the statement that was developed and adopted based off of their responses.

"Collaborating to identify location, design thematic elements and an initial business plan for a sustainable La Crosse Historic and Cultural Museum"

Local Museum & Archival Visits

The Task Force visited the following:

La Crosse County Historical Society (LCHS)

The tour was provided by the Executive Director, Board President, and staff of their facility at 145 West Avenue S. The Task Force was provided with an overview what their function is, what services they provide, their archival and storage needs, and their current building's limitations,

Riverside Museum

The tour was provided by Bob Taunt, a volunteer with the museum. The Task Force was provided with an overview of the museum's constraints, which includes space and lack of temperature control. Bob also stated that the museum has a lot of walking traffic, had a very successful "Night at the Museum" event for kids, and does have a very good collection of artifacts, particularly from the War Eagle.

St Rose Convent

The tour was provided by Mary Ann Gschwind, who is also on the Task Force, and the archivist for the Franciscan Sisters for Perpetual Adoration. (FSPA) The Task Force was shown their archival facility and given a tour of their collections of artifacts.

Regional Museum Visits

The Task Force agreed on the visiting three museums in the region that were determined to be successful in terms of theme, experience, long-term existence, etc. All of these visits included a tour the museum, including archives, storage, exhibit construction, as well as a meeting with the museum's Executive Director and staff, past Executive Directors, and other people who were instrumental in the museum's success. A common theme was heard from each visit. It is important to understand what the

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community will support and start building advocacy. This is conducted with Feasibility Studies. This applies to both financial support and its historic roots. It's important to determine what you want to do before you start looking for a building or developing plans. Once you figure out what you want to do you work with a museum story planner, exhibit designer and architect to start developing plans and renderings to illustrate your theme. These are then used for capital campaigns, fundraising, grant writing, etc. Important to also plan for future expansion. It was also mentioned that this is can be a 10-20 year process.

Below each museum visited is a link to the complete notes that were taken.

National Mississippi River Museum in Dubuque, IA,

https://www.cityoflacrosse.org/filestorage/407/463/Dubuque_NMRM_Visit_Notes2.docx

Vesterheim Norwegian American Museum in Decorah, IA,

https://www.cityoflacrosse.org/filestorage/407/463/Norwegian_Museum_Tour_Notes.docx

Chippewa Valley Museum in Eau Claire, WI,

https://www.cityoflacrosse.org/filestorage/407/463/Chippewa_Valley_Museum_Tour_February_19.docx

The Task Force also invited the Director of the Wisconsin Historical Society to hear about their current effort to build a new State Historical Museum in Madison.

Goal Setting

From the information and data that was gathered the Planning Department led the Task Force through a goal setting exercise and established the following goals

Short Term

1. Develop a project timetable that includes best practices in museum planning, including capital generation and stakeholder engagement.
2. Investigate the cost and scoping of a museum planning, feasibility and sustainability study, while also identifying qualified consulting firms.
3. Raise Funding to undertake a project planning, feasibility and sustainability study.
4. Create a stakeholder engagement plan, identifying all stakeholders beyond the task force and advisory group and gather information, build advocacy and invite participation in the project.
5. Create a public relations strategy on the project and identify an informational source, "managing the story" through a specific entity who engages the public, media and stakeholders with facts.
6. Engage various cultural groups in the City with the key result of giving holistic and respectful attention to our diversity

Mid Term

7. Work on a scope that gives people a memorable experience and one that encourages repeat visits through programming, refreshed exhibits and emotional connections.
8. Identify our audience and set additional goals for numbers of people attracted annually.
9. Communicate the feasibility study to the public and media through story-telling to build community pride and advocacy in the project
10. Revise the project timeline as needed
11. Identify the educational opportunities of the project

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12. Identify project themes that maximize peoples relationship to the stories , themes and experiences of the project
13. Consider project locational priorities
14. Build political support
15. Identify museum themes and permanent exhibits
16. Identify economic cycles, grant programs and other funding opportunities and consider professional assistance in pursuing funding.

Long Term (These long-term goals were expected to be refined after completion of a feasibility study)

17. Continue work on public advocacy building and the public perception of the historical society and project.
18. Raise capital to implement project goals beyond the feasibility phase, including the establishment of an endowment.
19. Obtain commitments from partners for funding, support, technical advisement, and beneficial networking.
20. Identify actual sites for new construction and building renovation options and acquire a site
21. Continue to pursue grants to add value to the project
22. Further develop and refine the business plan for sustainability
23. Hire a museum architect to design the facility
 - Produce conceptual and schematic designs and renderings for use in continued funding commitments
 - Develop the designs with stakeholder input and public engagement, continuing to build advocacy
 - Complete construction drawings and specifications and bid project with add-alternates to allow budget control and phasing options
24. Construct and occupy the facility (recommend a soft opening by invitation to work any bugs out before grand opening)

Members of the Task Force were given a tour of the Tribune Building located on 3rd Street N as a potential site for the future museum.

UWL-Feasibility Study

An advisory member of the Task Force, and a Faculty Member at UW-La Crosse suggested a partnership with the UW-La Crosse Tourism Research Institute to complete a Feasibility Study. The study could assist with determining community support and include a site analysis, identification of revenue sources, projected expenses and cost, evaluation of the market area for a new museum, evaluation of visitor perceptions and support towards a museum, and identify what experience or theme the community desires and/or supports. This partnership would include UWL faculty and students, the LCHS, and the Task Force.

In September 2019 the Common Council approved funding for completion of this study.

The final scope of the study was to determine the feasibility of creating a new La Crosse area historic and cultural museum by engaging local stakeholders, and obtaining additional primary and secondary data to further assess interest in a new museum, create a better vision of what this museum should be (if

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an interest was determined to exist), determine a potential location for the new museum, and further evaluate the feasibility of developing a new museum at the proposed location. The study included upwards of 50-60 individual students and students working on course embedded research projects working with faculty, the task force, and the community to gather the desired information. The following were goals of the project:

Goal 1: Meet with Task Force, Advisory Committee, and City representatives for initial project discussion

Goal 2: Involve local stakeholders

Goal 3: Identify visitor (tourist) perceptions and attitudes towards museums

Goal 4: Obtain information from other museums to assess feasibility of a new La Crosse Museum

Goal 5: Use primary and secondary data collected to conduct a site analysis of a potential La Crosse museum

Goal 6: Provide a final evaluation and summary of feasibility

Summary of Collected Data

Stakeholder Input

A range of data collection was conducted to determine if there was interest in the La Crosse community to support a new historical and cultural museum. This data was collected via a public survey, four public meetings held throughout La Crosse county (La Crosse, Onalaska, Holmen) and focus groups.

The results indicated that participants felt that there are currently inadequate historical/cultural resources in La Crosse including the lack of a historical/cultural museum.

“This is our opportunity to tell our authentic story”- Hmong community member

“We need something to keep the history alive for the children growing up in the area” – Public meeting participant

A new museum would provide La Cross County an opportunity to tell a true and informative story about the unique history of the area including:

1. The unique geographical features and rare ecosystems,
2. The range of cultures present in La Crosse and their influence on La Crosse’s history and development,
3. The opportunity to elevate non-dominant voices and historical experiences,
4. The range of industry present historically in La Crosse

In the Spring of 2020, a second public survey was completed to determine what type of experience the La Crosse community wanted in a new museum.

Participants were asked about the outside elements, admissions area, a range of exhibit types, workshop and educational spaces/offering, and conference/event space. The results included several salient themes for each of these areas:

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Outdoor Elements

Overwhelmingly, respondents most preferred an outdoor space with seating that allows for the gathering of community. Responses also consistently pointed to the importance of drawing on La Crosse's history in the final design of the visual elements included outside of the museum. Respondents also described a desire for the outdoor elements to be interactive, including its use in photo ops.

Admissions

Respondents felt that having the admissions area near museum exhibits was an important aspect of this feature. There was also preference for a more modern look with an open floor plan and some identified a preference for historical elements in the admissions area. Others pointed to the most important aspect being the welcoming nature of the admissions area and the importance of good customer service elements.

Visual Exhibit

Respondents stated a desire for interactive exhibits. In addition, respondents felt it was important to provide a variety of exhibit types and ensure they stay updated. Respondents also pointed to their desire for a focus on local history in the visual exhibits.

Technological Exhibit

Feedback focused largely on exhibits that are interactive or sensory based. Respondents also made clear their preference for a limit to the technology used in museum exhibits. Others brought forward health concerns related to highly interactive exhibits and were also concerned that exhibits should be both kid *and* adult-friendly. Respondents reiterated the desire for variety, a focus on local history, and accessibility.

Non-Technological Exhibit

Respondents preferred interactive elements with the non-technological exhibits. Respondents also desired the inclusion of local history and live demonstrations in the museum.

Virtual Element

Respondents were skeptical of the inclusion of virtual elements in a new museum. Any desire for inclusion of virtual exhibits focused on specific exhibit ideas, utilizing virtual exhibits for demonstrations, or integrating virtual experiences into the museum website

Workshop Space

Respondents felt workshop spaces could best be utilized in demonstrating and learning hard skills. Respondents also pointed to the benefit, if including a workshop space, of ensuring it is a separate space from the main exhibit areas in the museum.

Educational Opportunities

There was an interest in cultural workshops and nature-based workshops. Respondants also pointed to the importance of adult-based and youth-based educational opportunities. They also indicated the need for variety/flexibility in the educational offerings including offering them as special events.

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Conference Space

Some felt it would be important to have dedicated meeting rooms and to maintain flexibility in potential conference spaces. Others participants felt an auditorium would be the most useful space to include.

Event Space

The most common theme when asked about an event space was the ability to host music events, group bookings and community events. Respondents also pointed to the importance event space could play in providing the museum an additional revenue source and pointed to the importance of flexibility. Some respondents were skeptical of the benefit of including event space in the museum.

College Student Survey

A survey of UWL students was conducted to gauge their interest in visiting a new museum if it existed, and what would motivate them to visit.

63% of students surveyed were somewhat or very likely to visit a new museum.

- Hands-on, interactive opportunities would generate the greatest interest.
- Students frequently mentioned “art” in reference to visual exhibits depicting local cultures, stories of the past, architecture, and the natural environment.
- They want something unique- The building itself, the interactive opportunities, the way information and artifacts are displayed.
- Connection to the universities – Including the history/opportunities to learn about all the local universities
- Having something new to do was most frequently mentioned as the reason they would take friends and/or family to visit the new museum.

Visitor Survey

Visitors to Grandad’s Bluff and Riverside park were surveyed to learn more about visitor interest in going to a new museum, and what would motivate them to visit.

- 171 individuals were surveyed, 64.3% of whom were not residents of La Crosse County.
- 68.3% of La Crosse County residents indicated they were either somewhat or very likely to visit the new museum.
- 62.6% of non-residents indicated they were either somewhat or very likely to visit the new museum.
- Continuously interesting and rotated displays and exhibits followed by opportunities to learn would be top motivations for visiting the new museum

The study indicated that, based on 2019 Wisconsin Department of Tourism data, the average spending of a Wisconsin visitor is \$121.02 (total spending/total visitors). In 2019 visitors were estimated to have spent \$281.4 million in La Crosse County. Based on these estimates alone there are an estimated 2.3 million visitors to La Crosse County annually. This indicates a significant opportunity to create an attraction such a museum that a majority of visitors would visit.

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La Crosse Site Comparisons

The La Crosse Historical & Cultural Museum Task Force identified two existing sites near downtown La Crosse as having the potential to meet the needs of a new La Crosse museum: 1) an existing building at 333 Front Street North (CenturyLink) and 2) new development in the River Point District.

- Both sites identified by the task force have pros and cons. 333 North Front Street is more likely to attract more non-local visitors (tourists) due to its proximity to downtown and Riverside Park. However, access to floor space could limit the exhibits on display, and renovating the space could lead to higher costs. The River Pointe District site presents the opportunity to have a blank canvas and more readily design a space that meets the needs of a new museum. However, it is farther away from local attractions which could deter more spontaneous visits (especially from short-term riverboat tourists).
- There is a lot of interest in having a new museum that represents the history and cultures of the area. Either location would be expected to generate similar levels of membership and donations, and attendance from local community members.
- The development costs to meet the museum's needs and operation costs once it opens depends on several factors, many of which can be better estimated following architectural renderings and exhibit designs.
- Typically, the costs to operate in a renovated building can be higher due to aged systems (e.g., HVAC, electrical, security) in place. However, if those systems at 333 North Front Street are updated as stated the difference in operating costs between the two sites could be minimal.

Final Study Insights

- A site should be selected where an open museum setting can be created. Prior research has found that an open museum setting provides a more satisfying visitor experience and results in a greater likelihood that visitors will become repeat visitors. Open settings are less structured by management, facilitating opportunities for discovery and interaction with exhibits. Participants in this study appear to echo a desire for a similar setting and opportunities.
- Cost estimate: There is not enough information at this point to present a realistic cost estimate. Prior research has shown that cost per square foot for building a new museum varies drastically, whether renovating an existing building or new construction. Variations arise due to a range of factors including the quality of construction materials, final finishes, the need for system updates, and unforeseen expenses. Initial costs will also depend on decisions regarding types of exhibits and exhibit features. Operational costs will vary depending on the number of temporary exhibits and frequency of rotation. Temporary exhibits in comparable museums are on display anywhere from three months to two years. Data compiled on 34 history related museums built in the U.S. between 2003 and 2010 cost \$645.50 per square foot. Adjusted for inflation using the RSMMeans Historical Cost Index that cost is estimated to be \$841/sqft as of 2020. Thus, a 20,000 sqft museum could cost around \$16 million while a 40,000 sqft museum could cost approximately \$32 million.
- Exhibit designs in particular vary greatly ranging from less than \$100 per sqft for graphic floor/wall designs to more than \$600 per sqft for interactive exhibits. This cost is not only an initial cost, but a reoccurring cost every time temporary exhibits are changed.
- Costs of renovating an existing building could be lower if mechanical systems are up-to-date.

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- Overall there is strong interest in and support for a new La Crosse area historic and cultural museum. Community members were excited to be a part of the input process and we would recommend continuing to include them throughout the remaining steps required for the realization of a new La Crosse area historic and cultural museum

The complete final report is attached.

Recommended next steps of the Task Force.

- 1) Organizational Feasibility Study
- 2) Fundraising capability
- 3) Architectural renderings
- 4) Exhibit Designer
- 5) Capital Campaign strategy

At their February 11, 2021 meeting the La Crosse Historic & Cultural Museum Planning Task Force approved taking these next steps.

At their October 21, 2021 meeting the La Crosse Historic & Cultural Museum Planning Task approved entering into an agreement with FEH to complete the next planning steps. The La Crosse County Historical Society expressed their desire to take the lead in moving forward with planning and development of the museum project.