

# Report and Summary of Findings Pursuant to an Update of the Current Strategic Plan for the Besser Museum of Northeast Michigan

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## Executive Summary

Members of the board of directors of the Besser Museum for Northeast Michigan and Besser Executive Director, Christine Witulski, met with museum consultant, Ron Bloomfield (Central Michigan University Museum Studies program faculty) on Saturday, January 18, 2020 to update the Museum's strategic plan. Sixty-nine percent of the board was in attendance and went through a visioning session to assess where they currently stood, followed by several content presentations on museum Accreditation, best practices, and an update of the current Besser strategic plan and current progress on several major projects. The data gathered during the session shows that there is overwhelming support among board members to warrant creating three new areas of focus in addition to the original six goals of the strategic plan. These areas include: Building infrastructure, Collections, and three major exhibit projects. These three new goals are recommended to be added to the Besser's original strategic plan, with an additional recommendation that the board solicit additional board input going forward to help prioritize these goals. Specific recommendations have been made in this report on ways for the board to prioritize work going forward.

## Introduction

Members of the board of directors of the Besser Museum for Northeast Michigan and Besser Executive Director, Christine Witulski, met with museum consultant, Ron Bloomfield (Central Michigan University Museum Studies program faculty) on Saturday, January 18, 2020 at the Alpena Yacht Club. Nine members were present (one left early) and one was on the phone due to inclement weather. A list of board participants can be found in Appendix 2. This represented 10 of the 16 board members, or 63 percent of the voting board. The goal of the meeting was to update the Museum's strategic plan including where to focus efforts through the final two years of the plan.

## Summary of Findings

Mr. Bloomfield asked two questions during the opening segment: **What is one thing you think is cool or significant about the Besser Museum?**; and **What do you think is the Besser's primary role in the community?** Both sets of answers were put down on sticky notes and the answers given can be found in aggregate below and in full in Appendix 1 immediately following this report. When these answers were placed in the context of the six original Besser Museum strategic planning goals, it was found that at least three additional priorities needed to be added to the list: Collections management and preservation (new goal 7), Facilities Improvements (new goal 8), and completion of major exhibitions (new goal 9).

Goal 1: Foster an appreciation for art, history, and science

Goal 2: Engage all ages, abilities, and interests of the public

Goal 3: Present the interconnected stories of Northeast Michigan

Goal 4: Increase community awareness of museum services

Goal 5: Attract, train, utilize, and maintain Museum Volunteers and Staff

Goal 6: Ensure Financial Stability to protect museum's assets

Plus Goal 7: Preservation/collections management

Plus Goal 8: Building Infrastructure Stabilization/Improvements

Plus Goal 9: Exhibits/Village/Fisheries Heritage

It should be noted that both of these questions were undertaken prior to the major museum best practices and plan update discussion that followed, however a few of the responses referenced the three additional goals (7-9). The first question included two responses that referenced artifacts/collections, one that referenced preservation, one which referenced the Catherine V, and one which referenced Accreditation.

It should also be noted that the number of responses do not line up with one response per participant because some members gave multiple responses where they felt appropriate (ie. Fisheries heritage exhibit and native American exhibit on the same reply). Where appropriate, these were taken as two different replies. Therefore, the data was based on the number of total "replies."

The second question (Primary role) had responses that included 22.2 percent for both Goals 1 and 7, and 27.8 percent for both Goals 2 and 3. The remainder of goals were not represented.

Below are summaries of responses to four questions as relate to current six Besser Museum strategic plan goals plus three new goals based on sufficient interest to add to the list (7-9):

**Responses to question: What do you see as the Besser Museum’s primary role in the community?**

- To preserve and share history, arts, and science [Goals 2, 3, 7]
- Education [Goals 1,2,3]
- Educating the Public [Goals 1,2,3]
- To allow the public to experience the art and history and science of NE Michigan [Goals 1,2,3]
- Preserve Heritage-artifacts/story/culture [Goal 7]
- Offer all members opportunity to see museum [Goal 1]
- Collect, preserve histories (oral, etc..., artifacts) [Goal 7]
- To preserve and present, to teach the public our historic artifacts [Goals 2, 3, 7]

Goal 1:	4/18	22.2%
Goal 2:	5	27.8%
Goal 3:	5	27.8%
Goal 4:	0	0
Goal 5:	0	0
Goal 6:	0	0
Goal 7:	4	22.2%

After these two questions were asked and participants replied via post-it notes, Mr. Bloomfield presented a discussion of “Museum 101” where he discussed the particulars of how museums typically handle business. Topics covered included mission, collections management policies, museum hierarchy, best practices in museums, and museum collections management. A presentation followed on the American Alliance of Museums Accreditation program and how it interfaces with museum best practices, particularly as it relates to museum collections. A digital copy of the Powerpoint presentation accompanies this report.

Besser Executive Director Christine Witulski then gave members a status update on all six of the original strategic goals. She followed this with an update on each of the major projects: Great Lakes Fisheries Heritage Exhibit, Native American Exhibit, Fine Art, Historic Village Restoration, and Building Renovations. Ms. Witulski then gave an update of the collection management projects undertaken since the strategic plan was originally developed. Her update wrapped up with an update and discussion of the Besser’s budget. A copy of the updated material provided to the board of directors is available at the discretion of ED Witulski.

This discussion was followed by members being asked to answer the following question: **What are the three things you feel are important for the Besser to focus on during the next two years?**

The responses to this question fell within the following priorities:

Goals 1 and 4, 3 percent each. Goals 5 and 6, 8 percent each. Goal 8, 22 percent, and Goals 7 and 10, 27 percent. The remainder of the goals had zero responses. A listing of the specific responses can be found in Appendix 1.

**Responses to question: What are the three things you feel are important for the Besser to focus on during the next two years?**

- Building Maintenance [Goal 8]
- Collections Management [Goal 7]
- Historic Village Restoration [Goal 9]
- Save log cabin [Goal 9]
- Collections [Goal 7]
- Go along with Chris' ideas [Goal 5?]
- Fix museum building [Goal 7]
- Continue working on the Fisheries Heritage Trail (Chinook, Katherine V, Educational Programs) [Goal 9]
- Exhibit fine art [Goals 1, 9]
- Fix collections management [Goal 7]
- Execute RM Scott plan (building) [Goal 8]
- Complete historic village restoration [Goal 9]
- Complete boat exhibits in process (Fisheries) [Goal 9]
- Become fully staffed to operate more efficiently (paid staff and volunteers) [Goal 5]
- Increase awareness, "Traffic", and donors [Goal 4]
- Preserve assets (Building-inside and outside, and collections) [Goal 7, 8, 9]
- Staff and/or volunteer development [Goal 5]
- Facilities and maintenance (replacement and funding) [Goals 6,8]
- Collections manager and collections management [Goal 7]
- Get funding to repair building and do the repairs [Goals 6,8]
- Do the necessary and proper itemizing cataloging and safeguard our collection [Goal 7]
- Brainstorm for ideas for fundraising campaigns and possibly get more volunteers [Goals 5,6]
- Bring Fisheries heritage and native American displays on line so they are visitor ready [Goal 9]
- Bring collections management up to minimum accreditation standards [Goal 7]
- Facilities upgrades [Goal 8]
- Collections databases [Goal 7]
- Two Major Exhibit projects (Fisheries and Native American) [Goal 9]
- Priority-Facility maintenance needs [Goal 8]
- Continue work on getting the collections where they need to be [Goal 7]
- Keep moving forward on Native American Exhibit [Goal 9]
- Get Building reconfiguration, maintenance, and repair to level it needs to be [Goal 8]

Goal 1: 1 /37 2.7%

Goal 2: 0

Goal 3: 0

Goal 4: 1 /37 2.7%

Goal 5: 4/37 10.8%

Goal 6: 3/37 8.1%

Goal 7: 10/37 27%

Goal 8: 8/37 21.6%

Goal 9: 10/37 27%

The answers that were referenced as Goal 9 were an aggregate of major exhibition related projects and included the following responses (some listed more than one): Fisheries Heritage Exhibit: 5, Historic Village: 4, Native American Exhibit: 3, and Fine Art Exhibit: 1.

A final question was posed to each of the participants left at the end of the session (one member had left by this time): **What is one thing I can/am willing to do to help forward the goals of the Besser Museum?**

The following broad categories were extrapolated from the 10 responses (some include multiple topics):

Work on Collections/Preservation (3) [Goal 7]  
Fundraising/Grant Writing (3) [Goal 6]  
Fisheries Heritage Display (1) [Goal 9]  
Volunteer Appreciation (1) [Goal 5]  
Time/wherever needed (3)  
None (already overcommitted) (1)

A final period of discussion took place where the group discussed the “take aways” from the entire day. The responses fell among the following broad categories:

Funding needs [Goal 6]  
Facility needs [Goal 8]  
Collections needs [Goal 7]  
Personnel [Goal 5]  
Strong Identity [no specific goal]

The group wrapped up shortly after 2:00pm with the intention of the Besser board and ED Witulski continuing the discussion after a summary report with recommendations on next steps was submitted by Mr. Bloomfield.

## **Conclusions:**

The data shows that among the responses from the board members present, there is sufficient support for three additional goals to be added to the list of the original six strategic planning goals. Preservation and Collections Management (new goal 7) garnered 22.7 percent of the vote on the “Primary Function” question prior to any discussion of collections management or the Besser’s issues therein. This shows that almost one-quarter of board members already suspected or knew that this area needed to be addressed. The aggregate of the other three-quarters of responses to this question revolved around “Education” topics related loosely to goals 1-3. The remainder of goals did not even register.

After the two content presentations (Museum 101 and Besser updates), the responses shifted to heavily favor goals 7-9, which include the aforementioned collections/preservation work, and added building infrastructure and stabilization, and exhibits work. Taken all together, these three goals make up 75.6 percent, or just over three-quarters of the board responses. Looking at the priorities within goal 9, work on the Fisheries Heritage Trail exhibit was most favored, followed closely by completing work on the Historic Village, which was then followed closely again by completing work on the Native American exhibit.

[It should be noted that these three new goals may fit into some smaller part of the original six goals (like collections might fit somewhere in goal #6), however there appears sufficient support in the data gathered to make each of these three a new main goal. The benefit to bringing these three new goals to light as individual areas of focus is that they are not as easily “lost” in the minutia of the original strategic plan (which is fairly ambitious and dense) and therefore they are easily expressed as priorities going forward.]

The question where members were asked what they were willing to do shows that members are willing to help further these tasks, including Collections and fundraising (most responses) and Fisheries Heritage (one response)...though three did also reply that they would be willing to help where needed, which could bolster any priorities that the Besser has going forward.

The “take aways” discussed in the group centered around several of these same goals including funding, facility needs, collections needs, and personnel to make all of this happen.

Looking at all of the data presented, it is clear that there is enough support from the Besser board to realign their strategic planning goals to focus on moving forward on at least three major exhibit projects, placing an increased emphasis on moving forward with addressing the collections management issues, and addressing the building and infrastructure issues. Funding for all of this is the single biggest impediment to completing much of this, so it is also not a surprise that fundraising was brought up again at the end as a major issue that must be addressed before going forward.

## **Recommendations:**

It is recommended that the Besser Museum for Northeast Michigan consider the following going forward:

- Create a mechanism for board members who were not in attendance to comment on the original goals and three newly added goals, so as to build a consensus among the board.
- Of the three “new” goals that make up 75% of the proposed direction the board wants to take, all three will need to be evaluated and a plan put together for success with an estimate of needed financial and staffing needs to complete. All three had about an equal share of the vote, so it will be necessary to help set some priorities within these three goals. Additional board input may help prioritize these goals.
- The board should consider voting to reaffirm their commitment to Accreditation, and pending the outcome of that vote, it should be clear that there are some goals like collections that could take precedence since compliance with best practices in areas like this have a very well prescribed formula and some of this work requires time (volunteer and staff) rather than a direct money commitment in the short term.

- Other priorities should then be assessed and ranked from most important to those of lesser importance. This may be dependent on what resources are currently available verses what resources will need to be acquired.
- The board should also consider looking at what is left to complete each one of these outstanding major projects and assign a budget figure to the completion of the project. This, by itself, may ultimately help identify the direction of where priorities are placed. For instance, if one project is 85% complete and needs only funding that is in hand, that could be considered priority number one while the project that needs major fundraising and is only 25% complete will require more time, resources, and a plan to complete.
- It is imperative that going forward the Besser should consider adding additional training for new board members and ongoing refresher training for existing members that especially focuses on critical strategic plan items like collections, Accreditation, and museum best practices. Several board members were surprised by the information they heard in both the Museum 101, and Besser updates presentations; one even said that even though it was a lot of material in a short time, it gave her a much better understanding of how things should be done and what the board's obligation was going forward.
- One final recommendation is that the Besser should consider more than just this update to the strategic plan and may wish to undergo creating a new strategic plan much earlier than before the end of the next two years. At least one board member expressed an interest in this at the end of the session.

## Appendix 1: Responses to Questions

Responses to question: What is the coolest thing about the Besser Museum?

- Catherine V
- Native Relics and Artifacts
- Education via Preservation with a dose of recreation!
- Stories: the Besser Museum has the ability to tell so many different stories
- ...has and continues to provide experiences in Art, History, and Science to the public for the past 50 years and beyond
- It's Collections-Art and history-artifacts-it's amazing the scope of things held here
- Only Accredited Museum in Northern ½ of MI/Only Planetarium north of Bay City

Responses to question: What do you see as the Besser Museum's primary role in the community?

- To preserve and share history, arts, and science
- Education
- Educating the Public
- To allow the public to experience the art and history and science of NE Michigan
- Preserve Heritage-artifacts/story/culture
- Offer all members opportunity to museum
- Collect, preserve histories (oral, etc..., artifacts)
- To preserve and present, to teach the public our historic artifacts



Responses to question: What is 1 thing you can do to help forward the Besser Museum?

- Willing to help wherever needed (Tuffy)
- Grant Writing and/or Promotional content creation (John Caplis)
- Volunteer time
- After board, continue to work on Fundraising (Anne Belanger)
- Continue to work on collections (Claudia)
- Collections-willing to continue as a “worker bee” to help digitize accessions into database and help with the organization of physical objects
- Volunteer to assist with fundraising, volunteer appreciation, collections preservation
- Volunteer my time to help wherever they need me
- I’m over-committed in my life. I don’t want to add any commitments. I’ll be leaving the board in June
- Lead Fisheries Heritage Display-Fund seeking, project design, interpretation (Jim Johnson)

Responses to question: What are the three things you feel are important for the Besser to focus on for the next two years?

- Building Maintenance
- Collections Management
- Historic Village Restoration
- Save log cabin
- Collections
- Go along with Chris’ ideas
- Fix museum building
- Continue working on the Fisheries Heritage Trail (Chinook, Katherine V, Educational Programs)
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- Two Major Exhibit projects (Fisheries and Native American)
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- Get Building reconfiguration, maintenance, and repair to level it needs to be

Discussion points from “take aways” discussion at end:

- \$\$ Need more resources
- Facility needs priority
- Possibly hire grant writer or consultant
- Advertising and marketing to leverage funds
- Development committee formation
- Board Help to allow the E.D. to be “more places”
- Longer term plans for certain items
- Strong identity-how do we do business best
- Focus on areas where not as much momentum-collections and all facilities

## **Appendix 2: List of Board Members in Attendance**

Anne Belanger, President (via phone)

Dr. Greg Resnick

Claudia Chapman

Clarence Cross

Kristin Sharpe (left early)

Jim Johnson

Janet Young

John Caplis

Sue Stender

Judy Suszak