

American Alliance of Museums

November 3, 2017

**Alliance
Accreditation
Commission**

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William Tramosch
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Nantucket Historical
Association,
Nantucket, MA

Ms. Christine Witulski
Executive Director
Besser Museum for Northeast Michigan
491 Johnson St.
Alpena, MI 49707-1433

Dear Ms. Witulski:

After much consideration, the Accreditation Commission voted to table its decision on accreditation for the Besser Museum for Northeast Michigan. We discussed your museum at great length at our October 11-13, 2017 meeting, reviewing the Self-Study, supporting documents, and the Site Visit Report.

Clearly the museum has worked diligently to reconnect with its community and is now reaping the rewards of robust community engagement through programming and fundraising. However, the museum has not made the same level of effort to address long-standing, severe deficiencies in collections care and stewardship.

During the tabling period, the museum must compose and begin to act on a plan to address the serious collections care issues cited in the Visiting Committee's report. The plan must incorporate improvements to storage conditions, environmental monitoring and controls, cataloging, housekeeping, and pest control. Action steps should have accompanying assignments of responsibility and indicate what funding is available or could be obtained.

Given the size of the collection and the improvements to the physical plant that are needed to provide adequate storage conditions for it, we are concerned that the museum may not be able to make sufficient progress and successfully meet the standards for accreditation by the end of the tabling period. The museum may wish to consider voluntarily withdrawing from the Accreditation Program in order to focus on this work it clearly needs to do.

Accreditation Program policy allows museums to reapply to the program after a minimum of one year has elapsed from the date of withdrawal. If you choose to take the withdrawal option, its effective date will be the date you notify us of your decision. Please be assured that the program would then welcome a future re-application from the museum once it feels it meets the standards.

On average, 30 percent of all museums are tabled at each Commission meeting. We find that museums often use their tabling decision as an opportunity to address issues they recognize as areas of concern and to leverage change. You will be reassured to know that in the majority of these kinds of decisions, tabling issues get resolved and accreditation is awarded.

continued

Ms. Christine Witulski
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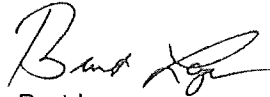
A copy of the Visiting Committee's report is enclosed, along with more information about the tabling process. During the tabling period the museum must address the issues cited above. As part of the tabling process:

✓ The museum must submit a progress report with relevant supporting documentation to the Accreditation Program staff **on or before April 25, 2018** for review by the Accreditation Commission at our June 2018 meeting.

✓ We will review the museum's final report at our February 2019 meeting and make our decision regarding accreditation based on the progress the museum has made in addressing our concerns. A specific report due date will be assigned after we review your progress report.

I encourage you to contact your Program Officer Allison Titman at (202) 289-9103 or atitman@aam-us.org if you have questions about the tabling process or if you would like to arrange a phone call with a Commissioner to discuss the Commission's decision.

Sincerely yours,



Burt Logan
Chair, Accreditation Commission
Executive Director and CEO
Ohio History Connection

Enclosures:

Site Visit Report
What You Need to Know About: The Museum's Site Visit Report
What You Need to Know About: The Tabling Decision and Process
Guidelines for the Institution: Tabling Action Progress and Final Reports

cc: Ann Diamond, Board President
Connie Gibbons, Visiting Committee
Lyndel King, Visiting Committee

Accreditation Site Visit Report Form

Institution	Besser Museum for Northeast Michigan
Visit Start Date	July 19, 2017
Peer Reviewers	Connie Gibbons Executive Director Mulvane Art Museum
	Lyndel King Director and Chief Curator Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum
Report Due Date	August 11, 2017

Special Instructions for this Site Visit

The Accreditation staff has flagged the items below for review by the Visiting Committee while on site. Please indicate whether the issue has been resolved and comment on how it was or is being addressed.

No special instructions for this site visit.

**Allison Titman
Accreditation Program Officer
June 1, 2017**

Collections Stewardship Role

Activities

Describe any concerns in the Overall Summary at the end of this section.

1. Visually inspect all areas where collections are stored (including offsite locations), exhibited or treated (conservation, preparation areas, etc.). Look for pests, leaks, inappropriate materials/housing or other circumstances that put collections at risk.

Mark if *not acceptable*:

- Collections Storage (onsite)
- Collections Storage (offsite) NA
- Exhibition areas
- Treatment areas

2. Observe the museum's environmental conditions and equipment as well as procedures for monitoring those conditions. Ask collections and/or facility management staff:

- How often are areas monitored? How? By whom?
- Show me some recent readings for various spaces.
- Do you have any current challenges in providing a stable environment for collections? How are they being addressed?

3. Look at documents used in the management and care of collections, including:

- Deeds of gift
- Incoming and outgoing loan agreements
- Physical and digital catalog records
- Conservation policies and plans
- Lending policies and agreements with non-museum entities (if applicable)

Questions		
	YES	NO
Are environmental conditions appropriate for the collections?		x
Are environmental conditions adequately monitored? <i>They are monitored manually when the collections manager is on site, otherwise not.</i>	x	
Are temperature and humidity levels within acceptable limits?		x
Are measures in place to mitigate significant climate fluctuations? There are dehumidifiers in some places but they are not really adequate to the task.		x
Are collections adequately documented? <i>They are documented but perhaps not adequately.</i>		x
Are collections adequately secured?	x	
Are collections on exhibition, in storage, on loan and in transit adequately protected?	x	

Core Standards (Characteristics of Excellence)		
	YES	NO
The museum owns, exhibits or uses collections that are appropriate to its mission.	x	
The museum legally, ethically and effectively manages, documents, cares for and uses the collections. Collections are not stored in conditions that meet standards		x
The museum's collections-related research is conducted according to appropriate scholarly standards.		N/A
The museum strategically plans for the use and development of its collections.		x
Guided by its mission, the museum provides public access to its collections while ensuring their preservation.	x	

Overall Summary: Collection Stewardship Role

Major Concerns:

Environmental conditions in storage areas are monitored manually by the collections manager (who must split her time between managing the collection and developing exhibits). She has humidity and temperature gauges of the type normally used in homes in all the collections areas. There are no recording temperature and humidity loggers so the monitoring depends on the presence of the collections manager. Temperature and humidity are not monitored when she is not on site.

She keeps handwritten sheets at each instrument and records the readings twice daily. In one storage area, the humidity ranged from 50% to 60% during one day while the temperature remained fairly steady, at 74° and 70°. In another part of the same storage, the temperature fluctuated from 61° to 69° and the humidity from 70% to 54%. The collections manager has placed two instruments in this room because she knows that there is a significant difference between conditions in the front and back of the room.

In this particular storage room, the collection is covered with plastic sheets nailed to the wall and angled so that when water comes in, it will run off over the collection objects into buckets on the floor. There were dozens of buckets on the floor but at the time of the visit only a few had water in them. Even with the monitoring of these conditions, there is little that the collections manager can do to mitigate the harm that these fluctuations create. There were dehumidifiers running in this storage area but it is very difficult to maintain anything close to a steady humidity level in this area. The collections manager noted that there had been a great improvement. When she arrived about 5 years ago, water gushed in and ran under the doors into other areas. The walls and floors were covered with black mold. The collections manager personally, with help from other staff, removed the collections, treated the mold, raised the collections off the floor on new palletes and installed the plastic sheets. About a dozen objects were deaccessioned due to damage from the water. The objects stored in this area are mostly wood and metal. There is some repair being done to the outside area above this storage room and it is hoped that this may fix the water coming into the room. Other collections storage areas were not subject to water coming in but did show humidity levels and fluctuations that are beyond acceptable professional standards.

The collections manager is replacing storage materials with acid free tissue and sleeves as she is able with resources available. Some taxidermy is in less than great condition, but it is appropriately not a high priority for restoration as it is not needed for display.

No regular pest control treatment is in place. The collections manager does a visual survey and reports no evidence of insects or other pests in storage or exhibit areas. Given the wide variety of collection materials that could harbor pests, this informal visual survey meets minimal standards.

Serious concerns about collections storage were mentioned in the last reaccreditation report, done in 2002, but it appears that not much has changed since that report. In fact, the 2002 report indicated that the reviewers were charged with investigating these same areas of concern from the original reviewers. The collections manager knows that conditions are woefully inadequate, but funds are simply not available to do anything about it. She does her best, but it is basically impossible for her to maintain adequate control of temperature and humidity in many storage rooms.

While the museum uses its collection for exhibition and education, it has a large collection (about 38,000 objects) and there are many objects that are rarely used. There is no county historical society, so many records and other items that would normally be in the collection of that institution are, instead, at the Besser Museum. As is the case in many small (and large) museums, past administrations were not as careful as they might have been about accepting objects, so the collection grew without much planning. The current staff is well aware of the issues. Collections have been separated into different rooms by media, but there is a lot that just cannot be addressed without major funding increases for staff and facilities.

The museum uses an Excel spreadsheet for collections data. It includes minimal information. Three out of four tests indicated incorrect object locations on the spreadsheets. Some could not be found at all anywhere near where they were supposed to be according to the records.

Minor Concerns:

As part of its collection, the museum also has several historic buildings that were moved to the site, as well as two historic boats. Most of the buildings are open to the public, some only for special festivals. While not totally restored, most have been repaired to stop deterioration. A homesteader's log cabin still needs restoration in order to be open.

While there are loan agreement forms, it appears that they are not always adequately signed and filled out. Temporary Custody Receipts also are not always adequately filled out and signed by both parties, and it seems that the temporary custody receipts often stand in for loan agreements.

Exemplary Practices:

The collections manager takes her responsibilities for the collection very seriously and knows that the museums conditions and procedures are not up to standards. She has already

accomplished a lot in the time she has been at the museum, but not as much as would be needed to bring conditions and documentation to museum standards. It is a frustrating job and she does it to the best of her ability and as financial resources will allow.

If the museum noted any areas of change in the Self-Study, comment on how well the museum has handled them or is preparing for them.

Organizational Health

Activities

Describe any concerns in the Overall Summary at the end of this section.

1. Visually inspect all spaces used by the general public and the staff, as well as those that are unoccupied. Look for any potential risks to the facility or the people who use it. Look for signs that the facility is anything other than clean, safe and well-maintained.

Mark if *not acceptable*:

- Public areas (indoor and outdoor)
- Office areas
- Other non-public areas (indoor and outdoor)

2. Observe the relationships between staff and the governing authority. Learn what staff members, volunteers and governing authority representatives think about the institutional culture, staff morale and the ability of the institution to meet the needs of its stakeholders with the resources available.

Questions		
	YES	NO
Do the knowledge, skills and abilities of the museum's governing authority enable the group to effectively govern the museum?	x	
Is there a real, practical delegation of authority from the governing authority to the director?	x	
Does everyone understand the organizational structure?	x	
Are the workplace dynamics healthy?	x	
Is the museum living within its means?	x	
Do the museum's facilities meet the needs of its staff as well as its visitors?	x	
Does the decision-making structure accommodate change from the bottom up as well as from the top down?		

Core Standards (Characteristics of Excellence)		
	YES	NO
The governance, staff and volunteer structures and processes effectively advance the museum's mission.	x	
The governing authority, staff and volunteers have a clear and shared understanding of their roles and responsibilities.	x	
The governing authority, staff and volunteers legally, ethically and effectively carry out their responsibilities.	x	
The composition, qualifications and diversity of the museum's leadership, staff	x	

and volunteers enable it to carry out the museum's mission and goals.		
There is a clear and formal division of responsibilities between the governing authority and any group that supports the museum, whether separately incorporated or operating within the museum or its parent organization.	x	
The museum legally, ethically and responsibly acquires, manages and allocates its financial resources in a way that advances its mission.	x	
The museum operates in a fiscally responsible manner that promotes its long-term sustainability.	x	
The museum allocates its space and uses its facilities to meet the needs of the collections, audience and staff.	x	
The museum has appropriate measures to ensure the safety and security of people, its collections and/or objects and the facilities it owns or uses.		x
The museum has an effective program for the care and long-term maintenance of its facilities.		x
The museum is clean and well-maintained, and provides for the visitors' needs.	x	
The museum takes appropriate measures to protect itself against potential risk and loss.		x
The museum complies with local, state and federal laws, codes and regulations applicable to its facilities, operations and administration.	x	

Overall Summary: Organizational Health

The Besser Museum of Northeast Michigan serves as a vital cultural institution in its community. The small but dynamic staff is courageous and ferocious in their commitment and dedication to serving their community and presenting engaging and relevant public programs. Staffed by 4 full-time and 4 part-time people, the museum is open seven days a week, only closing on major holidays. Leadership for the museum has stabilized under the direction of Executive Director Christine Witulski. She was appointed by the Board of Directors in 2012 after having served two separate terms as interim director. A native of Alpena and with a background in education, she has assembled a staff and board that are fully committed to community service.

The Besser Museum has continued to change and grow in recent years. The board of directors and the staff appear to have clear understanding of their roles. There is a positive and can-do attitude expressed by everyone interviewed, and the shared commitment from staff and board is a tribute to Witulski's leadership.

A recent campaign resulted in \$500,000 to support upgrades to museum exhibits and an increase to the endowment. Under Witulski's leadership, the financial situation of the organization has stabilized and they have accumulated \$120,000 in savings. Although an emergency could place the organization in jeopardy, their financial situation has dramatically improved and the board is fully committed to fiscal health of the museum.

Major Concerns:

A major concern is the challenges with collections management. One person who splits their time between collections management and exhibition coordination cannot adequately maintain complete records and address issues associated with inadequate environmental controls in

storage areas. Portions of the collection are protected from water by plastic sheets, and environmental conditions are recorded manually daily or as time permits. As noted in the collections section of this report, little has changed since the June 2002 report.

Although the Museum has PastPerfect software for managing collections, objects are inventoried and managed through an Excel Spreadsheet. The demands of overseeing a collection of this scope, size, and condition outpace staff's capacity to manage it and risks to collections are high.

Minor Concerns:

With the exception of the addition of a full-time Digital Dome Program Coordinator, staff for the Besser has not grown since the last review. Public programs have increased dramatically and collections continue to expand. The area of the Museum's operation that is most at risk—collections—continues to be managed by one person who is also serving as a curator and exhibitions coordinator.

Staff is highly motivated, enthusiastic, and committed to the mission of the Museum and the public they serve, but without planning and commitment to capacity building, there is a risk of staff burnout. As noted, the Collections Manager is also responsible for Exhibitions, and the Education Coordinator is also responsible for Marketing. The Facilities Manager oversees nine buildings with 30,000 square feet and eight acres of land that includes a nature trail, in addition to providing support for collections and exhibitions and overseeing the gift shop, memberships, and admissions.

Exemplary Practices:

The Executive Director has a deep commitment to the community. With her background in Education, she provides strong leadership and the commitment to community engagement is exemplary. The small but dynamic staff has a can-do attitude and approach to their work. The partnerships with community groups such as the Doll Club and individuals dedicated to restoring cultural artifacts related to the shipping and fishing culture of the community greatly expand the resources and capacity of the staff.

If the museum noted any areas of change in the Self-Study, comment on how well the museum has handled them or is preparing for them.

Educational Role

Activities

Describe any concerns in the Overall Summary at the end of this section.

1. Look at the museum's website. Pay particular attention to how the museum is using the internet to deliver content and share information about its educational activities and resources.
2. If possible, observe a program, tour or other educational activity in progress. Does the staff member or volunteer conducting the program appear informed and trained? Is the content appropriate to the museum's mission?
3. Examine all the interpretive materials or equipment in the exhibition spaces (e.g., gallery guides, wall text, labels, videos, audio guides, interactives, etc.).

Questions		
	YES	NO
Are the interpretive materials accurate, informed and professionally presented?	x	
Are the interpretive materials and equipment appropriate and accessible to different audiences?		x
Is the museum's educational programming developed in accordance with and presented with clear ties to educational standards and curricula?	x	
Does the museum actively, consistently evaluate interpretive programming and educational content?		x

Core Standards (Characteristics of Excellence)		
	YES	NO
The museum clearly states its overall educational goals, philosophy and messages, and demonstrates that its activities are in alignment with them.	x	
The museum understands the characteristics and needs of its existing and potential audiences and uses this understanding to inform its interpretation.	x	
The museum's interpretive content is based on appropriate research.	x	
Museums conducting primary research do so according to scholarly standards.	x	
The museum uses techniques, technologies and methods appropriate to its educational goals, content, audiences and resources.	x	
The museum presents accurate and appropriate content for each of its audiences.		x
The museum demonstrates consistent high quality in its interpretive activities.		x
The museum assesses the effectiveness of its interpretive activities and uses those results to plan and improve its activities.	x	
The museum demonstrates a commitment to providing the public with physical and intellectual access to the museum and its resources.	x	

Overall Summary: Educational Role

The Besser Museum utilizes community partnerships and volunteers to provide wide variety of educational programs in the arts, history, and the sciences. Staff is committed to ensuring that the community has opportunities to engage in meaningful ways through educational and family programs. Utilizing volunteers in the presentation of local history creates a strong sense of pride and ownership. Many exhibits do not have interpretive signage; however, docents and volunteers, when present, are able to provide information and context for exhibits. There were no docent tours or interpretive programs presented during the visit, nor was there mention of museum education pedagogy or teaching techniques.

The planetarium was recently renovated and equipment upgraded. A full-time Digital Dome Program Coordinator was newly hired, and had only been the job for a few weeks at the time of our visit. The Planetarium actively interprets physical science and the Museum's goal is to expand on the programming and create and present digital content in the areas of art, history, and science. Interpretative programs featured in the digital dome are presented to school groups. Screenings and programs for the general public are scheduled two to three times daily. The coordinator for the digital dome has plans to recruit and train more volunteers so that programming can be expanded.

An exciting new exhibit is the LaFarge Fossil Park. Interpretive panels provide content for visitors who can dig for fossil material in the park. Fossil material is donated and visitors are able to take their finds with them. In 2013, a collaborative project resulted in an outdoor panel exhibit in the fossil dig area that includes identification keys and maps of other local geological sites. The students of a local elementary school spent two years researching fossils of the Devonian period and exploring local quarries in order to design and create a series of interpretive signs that are featured as part of the Museum's fossil park.

Major Concerns:

As noted in the 2002 accreditation report, many of the natural history exhibits lack substantive interpretive signage for self-guiding visitors. There is no interpretation or narrative arc to create context for the exhibits. Although the fish specimens have been divided into native and non-native sections, there is an absence of content about the marine life itself and the environment that sustains it. Immediately adjacent to the marine life exhibits, mountain mammals and woodland creatures are presented alongside an African Safari exhibit, again, without interpretative labels.

Permanent exhibits remain unchanged, including the *Avenue of Shops* depicting the 19th-century community, and it lacks interpretation of the business and economic development of the region.

The archaeological exhibition of Native American tools, pottery, and ornament has not changed since the 2002 accreditation report. That report noted plans were to update the exhibit and include interpretation of contemporary Native American culture in the region. Although that still has not been accomplished, the Museum recently received a grant to hire consultants and begin community work to start the process of updating the exhibition.

An exhibition of American Printmakers featured works from the collection and although they were identified, there was no interpretive content or labeling to guide visitors. The website does include biographies of the artists, but how the work came to the museum's collection, what the works represent in terms of American Printmakers and specifically the WPA, and other information about the prints and the print collection was not presented.

Minor Concerns:

There is no systematic approach to assessing programs and gathering feedback from visitors and stakeholders; however, the strategic plan identifies the objective to accomplish this by December 2018. Meeting that deadline may be difficult in light of the ambitious schedule of activities and new exhibits that are developing.

Exemplary Practices:

The Besser Museum's commitment to community engagement serves as a model for all of us. The director and the staff have made a commitment to understand the needs of the community and they actively seek ways to remain vital and relevant. The collaboration with an elementary school to design and create interpretive panels displayed in the fossil park is an exciting and innovative approach to working with the community.

If the museum noted any areas of change in the Self-Study, comment on how well the museum has handled them or is preparing for them.

Planning

Activities

Describe any concerns in the Overall Summary at the end of this section.

1. Ask the staff, volunteers and governing authority representatives for their perspectives on the museum's strategic planning process. Do they feel involved in planning for the museum's future? Are they familiar with the contents of the museum's current strategic plan?

2. Ask at least one staff member, one volunteer and one board member what the mission of the museum is (verbatim or in spirit) and how it connects to their work. Can they explain the mission and the effect it has on the museum's day-to-day operations?

Questions		
	YES	NO
Do the staff and board agree on the museum's vision and strategic goals and how it is going to achieve them?	x	
Is there a culture of institutional planning, self-reflection and continual improvement?	x	
Are staff, volunteers, board members and the community involved in strategic planning in some way?	x	
Is the plan being followed? Does the reality of what's happening at the museum generally match the institutional planning documents?	x	
Is the plan guiding decisions?	x	
Does the leadership actively gauge progress on the plan and make adjustments?	x	

Core Standards (Characteristics of Excellence)		
	YES	NO
The museum has a clear understanding of its mission and communicates why it exists and who benefits as a result of its efforts.	x	
All aspects of the museum's operations are integrated and focused on meeting its mission.		x
The museum's governing authority and staff think and act strategically to acquire, develop and allocate resources to advance the mission of the museum.	x	
The museum engages in ongoing and reflective institutional planning that includes involvement of its audiences and community.	x	
The museum establishes measures of success and uses them to evaluate and adjust its activities.	x	

Overall Summary: Planning

The Besser Museum recently updated the strategic plan, which identifies six goals that they will focus on through 2021. The museum aspires to be more than a collection of artifacts and static exhibits, and seeks to create a space that encourages social engagement while elevating the status of the human experience and man's relationship to the natural environment. The heart of the plan encompasses goals and objectives designed to foster an appreciation for art, history, and science; build interest and celebrate the interconnected stories of the region; and increase community awareness of the museum's services. Finally, the plan cites goals to attract the highest quality staff and volunteers and to ensure financial stability, enabling them to protect museum assets.

Under the leadership of Executive Director Christine Witulski, there has been a period of stability where the museum's financial situation has stabilized. They have been able to build a small operating reserve and they are slowly making progress towards updating exhibits that have remained unchanged for many years.

Major Concerns:

Although goal 6.c of the strategic plan is "*employ AAM standards in all storage areas to ensure the proper care and preservation of museum and collection...*," the museum does not have a plan to address facilities maintenance, upgrades, and improvements. As noted previously, collections storage areas lack the tools needed to monitor and control environmental conditions, and in some areas, the only barrier between collections and water are plastic sheets. As public programs have excelled, the commitment to preservation and conservation of the objects and materials in the museum's collection have lagged (with the exception of efforts to restore and preserve an historic commercial fishing vessel, the Katherine V). Without intentional and deliberate planning, these challenges are unlikely to improve.

Minor Concerns:

Exemplary Practices:

If the museum noted any areas of change in the Self-Study, comment on how well the museum has handled them or is preparing for them.

Public Service Role

Activities

Describe any concerns in the Overall Summary at the end of this section.

Prior to the site visit:

1. Review the museum's online presence:
 - Google it and review the results.
 - Look at its presence on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter.
 - Read online reviews of it on sites like Trip Advisor and Yelp.
 - Get a feel for the museum's culture, voice and persona. Notice how people talk about the museum in the community at large.

2. Using their programming and online presence as your guide, note your perception of the museum's self-identified communities.

During the site visit:

1. If the museum has a visitor comment book, read what people have written.

2. Talk to community members, either formally or informally, to get their impressions of the museum. Use your interactions with hotel staff members, taxi drivers, food service personnel and other local residents to gather their impressions of the museum.

Questions		
	YES	NO
Does the museum encourage and facilitate community dialogue about the programs and services it offers?	x	
Is a drive for diversity evident in the composition of the staff, visitors and board? The community the museum serves is not ethnically diverse. The staff is diverse in age and gender.	x	
Is a commitment to physical accessibility apparent throughout all facilities and programming?	x	
Does the community demonstrate an awareness of and investment in the museum, its mission and its collections?	x	
Did you see evidence that the community values and supports the museum, and sees it as a trusted resource?	x	
Is the museum meaningfully engaged with its professional and cultural communities?	x	

Core Standards (Characteristics of Excellence)		
	YES	NO
The museum is a good steward of its resources held in the public trust. It is not a good steward of its collections but it is trusted by the community—no one sees the storage—they only see the community service which is exemplary		x
The museum identifies the communities it serves, and makes appropriate decisions in how it serves them.	x	
Regardless of its self-identified communities, the museum strives to be a good neighbor in its geographic area.	x	
The museum strives to be inclusive and offers opportunities for diverse participation.	x	
The museum asserts its public service role and places education at the center of that role.	x	
The museum demonstrates a commitment to providing the public with physical and intellectual access to the museum and its resources.	x	
The museum is committed to public accountability and is transparent in its mission and its operations.	x	

Overall Summary: Public Service

The museum’s audiences are local people and tourists. First commercial fishing and then sport fishing tourism have been major economic drivers, but invasive species have pretty well wiped out those industries. Now, the community is attempting to reinvigorate tourism by other means. The Besser museum is part of that effort, along with the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary operated by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The Besser partners with NOAA for promotion and programs.

The Besser’s website looks and feels like the museum—homey and friendly. It gets great reviews on Trip Adviser and Yelp. The community loves the museum. Because it is a small town (11,000) everybody knows everybody and the museum’s director, a native, is widely respected. Everyone from the breakfast waitress to the volunteers and board members speak exceptionally highly of her efforts to make the Besser the center of community life. The persona of the museum is “down home” and friendly. Staff members or volunteers greet every visitor with a smile. The museum’s signage is welcoming, if a bit haphazard. A community volunteer group tends the flower gardens around the museum. A staff member tends to the facilities and the rest of the grounds. They are well kept—the museum grounds look clean and neat. Banners on poles near the museum announce its presence, as do signs and a giant eagle head sculpture and other sculptures in front of the museum. The museum is a great source of pride to the local community.

It is our perception that visitors are either local people or tourists looking for something else to do in town. Tourists generally do not make a trip to Alpena to see the museum, but once they are there they go to the museum and are charmed. The museum’s Fossil Park is quite popular, and when completed, the restored fishing vessel and the exhibit around it will be an attraction.

The Besser's planetarium has just purchased new digital equipment and hired a new curator, so it will likely become an attraction for locals and tourists alike. Visitors, from observation, are middle aged to older couples or young families. Because we visited in the summer, school groups were not observed. Visitors do not seem to be ethnically diverse, nor is the community.

Major Concerns:

Minor Concerns:

Exemplary Practices:

The museum is exemplary in the way they have engaged their community. Their volunteers have taken on projects that would have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to accomplish. A group of volunteers, mostly men above the age of 70, completely restored a fishing vessel, the Katherine V, that had been deteriorating on museum property for at least 25 years. The next project will be the restoration of a former scientific data-gathering vessel that is on the property, covered by protective material.

Staff members have engaged regional schools in exemplary outreach efforts.

The charismatic director, an Alpena native, has reached out to all areas of the community and formed relationships and partnerships that have made the museum the center of community life. One indication of success is a recent successful capital campaign that raised \$500,000 from a community of about 11,000 in a county of about 30,000 residents. This shows a level of community engagement that most museums can only dream of!

If the museum noted any areas of change in the Self-Study, comment on how well the museum has handled them or is preparing for them.

Concluding Narrative

The Besser has achieved astounding recognition by its community as a major force in the economic and cultural animation of the region. It has galvanized volunteers and in-kind contributions that would be the envy of most museums. It organized a successful capital campaign that raised \$500,000 from a community of about 11,000 in a county of approximately 30,000 residents. In terms of public service, the Besser Museum is exemplary. The director and full-time staff of four, as well as a host of volunteers, are energized and determined to continue to revitalize the Besser. It is already thought of as an essential resource to the community.

It is woefully underfunded and understaffed but it is amazing what the tiny staff has been able to accomplish. Each of the staff performs multiple functions and they are all committed to the success of the museum and public programs. Their greatest success is the engagement of their community. The Besser is seen as a tremendous asset to the region. It is described as a life force of the community. Its persona, on its website and in person, fits its community. It is homey and welcoming—a museum that is professionally operated but is not intimidating or off putting to any local resident or tourist who visits this area of Michigan. The draw of the area is Lake Huron, fishing, and outdoor activities, and the museum responds to these tourists with exhibits. When the history of commercial fishing exhibit around the restored Katherine V is finished, it will represent a detailed explanation of the history of commercial fishing industry for residents and tourists alike.

The 2002 report spoke of an imminent revisiting of the museum's Native American exhibit. This apparently did not happen. Now, fifteen years later, it is hoped that this will actually take place so that the exhibit will meet more professional museum standards and contemporary approaches.

The museum is attracting more organized visits from regional schools and the fossil park is a draw for families and visitors. Museum staffers are very aware of ecology and try to practice high standards.

A major challenge for the Besser in meeting accreditation standards is that it is saddled with larger collections than it has the resources to manage and protect. The museum tries to limit collections growth, but like many small community museums it is seen as a home for vintage items of high nostalgic value that are often redundant or of little use to museum programs. Because there is no county historical society, the Besser maintains collections that might usually be maintained by that kind of institution. It does not have the resources in staff or facilities to appropriately care for or use these collections and it does not seem that this will be the case in the foreseeable future.

Issues around collections stewardship have not been solved since the 2002 reaccreditation report. Collections stewardship has been an issue since that date, and even before that. In that report, collections care issues were pointed out with assurances that they were in the process of being solved. A similar situation exists today in terms of collections care; the same issues exist fifteen years later, with assurances that they will soon be solved. While the current staff does its best to achieve standards in collections stewardship, it is battling facilities and a previous lack of stewardship that are really overwhelming. Even if the repairs to the area above the storage area

that has had gushing water are successful, maintaining control of the environment will continue to be an issue for the Besser's collections.

One major success in terms of collections care is the restoration of the Katherine V. This fishing vessel had been on the grounds for 25 years or more and was deteriorating quickly. With the help of dedicated volunteers and community fundraising, the vessel has been completely restored and will be the centerpiece of a new exhibit on the history of commercial fishing in the region. That is a great success in collections care and community engagement of which the museum is justifiably proud.