

A
REVIEW
OF THE
JESSE BESSER MUSEUM
FIVE YEAR PLAN

Prepared by:
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Alpena, Michigan
August 14, 1981

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It has been my privilege, Dennis, . . .

. . . to review at your request the Five Year Plan for the Jesse Besser Museum presented in the Spring of 1980 by the Museum's Development Committee.

My review and critique is presented herewith with the sincere hope that it will help the Museum with the necessary revisions in that plan and indicate some positive avenues for the success of the institution.

This report has been in process since you submitted your request for my review on March 5, 1981.

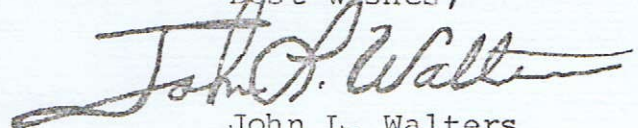
The elements went together slowly after much review and research, but it was not possible to complete and present the report until certain economic factors were known, chief of which was the Reagan Administration's demands for Congressional approval of extensive budget cuts affecting grants to the arts, CETA and many others affecting institutions, including museums.

Those demands were met and with other area indicators affecting this review, it is evident that the future of the Jesse Besser Museum will depend on the success of developing programs that will generate revenues locally toward a general goal of self-sufficiency, at least for operations.

This report with my review and critique is written to help plan for that goal.

I look forward to being of further service.

Best wishes,



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REVIEW OF THE PLAN

Overwhelming concession by Congress to the Reagan Administration's demand for substantial tax cuts is a major development that the authors of the Jesse Besser Museum Five Year Plan could not foresee when their excellent work was presented in the Spring of 1980.

There is no question now that local projects will have to be done, financed, and supported with local resources. Grant programs, regardless of how worthy, will not be available for many endeavors including museums.

Those tax cuts clearly indicate that the Museum's Development Committee, administration, staff, Board of Directors and friends of the museum must look to new approaches to the operation of the museum...approaches that will generate sufficient cash revenues for goods and services to operate the museum for the benefit of the total Alpena community.

In speaking of the total Alpena community, approaches must be developed that meet the needs of the several county area for which Alpena is a center of commerce and culture.

It is the opinion of the reviewer that the Jesse Besser Museum stands as an outstanding institution that should be maintained, strengthened and expanded in a balanced program of development that will make for a broader base of service and interest while adhering to the policy statement from the Board of Directors on September 28, 1970 and the expansion of that policy statement adopted December 15, 1977.

On the policy statement itself, your reviewer would recommend that the statement be broadened by adding "industrial" exhibits as well as ". . . historical, scientific, artistic, and technological collections . . ." called for in that statement.

Major financial support for such institutions as the Jesse Besser Museum traditionally come from philanthropies, good corporate and business citizens, and the extreme generosity of the dedicated few. Times would indicate that consideration be given to programs that would encompass far more of the community and the total area with the goal of developing wider interest and involvement, and thus derive revenues from a much broader base to offset the government sources for monies and services which will no longer be available.

The Reagan budget cuts which Congress has approved, the general condition of the economy (particularly in Northeastern Michigan); the critical financial condition of the local governmental units and school districts, and the general mood of the people as a whole would indicate a need to

attract a little from many rather than large measures of support from a few.

Thus, the Museum's Development Committee could find itself involved with marketing as well as development.

It would appear that the Jesse Besser Museum is facing an immediate goal of survival, but the approaches adopted to achieve that survival and go on with developmental planning for the museum's future must not in any way mitigate the high quality image the Jesse Besser Museum has attained. It is entirely too easy to concentrate on saving money rather than making money, and thus, lose sight of the mission. The mission should be clearly established, its parts carefully defined, and a program developed to achieve that mission within the resources available and the revenues that can be reasonably expected.

Some specific observations and comments on the Jesse Besser Museum Five Year Plan follow with the hope of providing, by means of review and critique, some avenues for planning, and to put the overall approach in balance with each segment of the Statement of Purpose of 1970 and its ammendment of 1978, plus the recommended addition of "industrial exhibits" mentioned above.

Of first concern would be the realignment of priorities relative to fund raising because with current economic conditions planners of the museum's future will not be so much concerned with fund raising as much, but rather with generating revenues from museum operation and the sale of goods and services. Perhaps, then, the order of the five areas of financial support should be adjusted as follows:

A - An expanded gift shop

This would appear to move to top priority status from its third place position before. Proper stocking of merchandise relative to museum exhibits, functions and purposes will be essential along with extended hours of operation. The gift shop is the quickest means available to generate revenue.

B - Charging admission fees

This will have to be done, but not until a careful plan is developed. Perhaps a "season ticket" arrangement and some other variations will be necessary to make it more palatable.

C - Receiving revenues from school districts for museum services rendered

The school districts will find it exceedingly difficult to provide this kind of support unless they can supplant a program or service that the museum and its facilities and staff can perform for the same or less money with a better result.

D - A major fund-raising campaign

This will have to be considered, of course, but the mood of the community on public financial matters (e.g. school millage) makes this a difficult area for planning. Scope and purpose will be extremely important and should be tied closely with a museum plan for its own generation of revenues in proportion to the amount of gifts asked.

E - An ongoing grant program

The Besser Foundation, of necessity, has had to limit the funds it will be able to make available to the Jesse Besser Museum. In the face of this, the Museum must work even harder to be worthy of that support. In general, grants will be hard to find which makes it imperative for the Museum to strive toward something approaching self-sufficiency at least for basic operations.

Professional Staff considerations will be set aside with the recommendation that the minimal core of fine staff people now functioning will have to be maintained. Future staff considerations will be indicated as plans develop for new approaches.

Exhibitions also will be set aside in view of comments already made with the thought that the following comments on Collections and Archives and the comments that follow after that will give some indications of the direction Exhibition Planning should take.

A gross imbalance in approach in the Jesse Besser Museum Five Year Plan becomes apparent in reviewing the section on Collections and Archives. In the words of the plan itself, several items are of great importance to the Museum, yet they received only passing attention, as follows:

- + The historical collections of Maps of the Great Lakes...etc...(from the paragraph on Page 4 of the plan) are extremely important but where are

they displayed? The collection of historical pictures mentioned in the same paragraph could be a source of museum originated picture post cards to be sold in the Museum Gift Shop and wholesaled to other outlets. Old charts and maps are good sources of materials suitable for framing.

- + Only three lines are devoted to ". . . the Museum's most significant collection", referring to the Collection of Man. What are the Museum's plans for further developing of such a valuable collection?
- + "The high point of the collection. . .", namely the Haltiner collection of copper artifacts, is only mentioned. Why not copies (made in the Museum workshops) of these and related items for sale as souvenirs in the gift shop?
- + Only two lines are devoted to lumbering which all but ignores the greatest heritage of the community and the area. Use of log marks, for example, for souvenir items to be sold in the gift shop and the creation and sale of miniature logging tools for charm bracelets are distinct possibilities for gift shop items. Expansion of the lumbering exhibit with the help of groups like those representing area lumberjacks and the timber industry as a whole should be considered.
- + We have an important agricultural region, but barely a mention in the museum's Five Year Plan.
- + The reviewer cannot support the attention to the Clewell copper-glazed pottery from Ohio especially in the same sentence with "Indian baskets." It is the humble opinion of the reviewer that the Clewell materials, while they are highly unusual and of great artistic and academic value, have no interest for 99 per cent of the people in the Alpena area. On the contrary, the Indian baskets are extremely important and should be developed into a separate and permanent exhibit and that such baskets (which are available) be offered for sale in the gift shop.

At this point in the Five Year Plan we see more than a page devoted to art. Here is where the imbalance is. The attention to art should be no more or no less than the attention paid to "historical, scientific. . . and technological collections." The works of Dali and Picasso, as great as they may be, do not fit into the Alpena community. That a few people might think that they should is not sufficient reason to make it a reality.

The Five Year Plan makes mention of attracting tourists. You attract tourists with items not available to them elsewhere. Dali and Picasso are available in some form in most art centers.

If there is to be attention to art then let it be Dorothy Gheen and other fine Northern Michigan artists. Let us see the art that features the woods and the waters of Northern Michigan and the Northern Great Lakes, the lighthouses, the wildlife and the wildflowers, the architecture, waterfalls, our history, and life of the area farmers, lumberjacks, sailors, commercial fishermen and industry.

And most of all, the Museum should consider expansion of aboriginal art including the Indian baskets and the porcupine quill boxes (currently carried in the gift shop).

Your reviewer considers the mural in the Alpena Savings Bank to be of far more value to the community, its people, its school children and visitors than most of the art exhibits seen in the Museum in the past year.

Accessibility for the Handicapped, of course, has to be done. But the attention given to the subject in the Five Year Plan is out of proportion to the mission of the Museum as a whole. Let's concentrate on approaches that will make the handicapped want to come as well as many other people.

ATTENTION TO INDUSTRIAL

The suggestion has been made that attention be given to "industrial" collections. Your reviewer considers this important because area industry is not covered and no provision is made in the Statement of Purpose and its amendment for a possible basis of participation of industry. Here are some thoughts:

- + An explanation of the geology that makes Alpena a major cement production center and how cement is made would be in order. A permanent display should be considered. (Perhaps various items made from locally produced cement would be appropriate souvenirs for the visitor).
- + The museum was made possible by Jesse Besser and relies heavily on the continued support of the Besser Foundation, but miniature masonry construction units that a child could take home and play with like blocks or Lincoln Logs are not available in the Museum's gift shop (or anywhere for that matter).
- + Alpena is important as a paper manufacturing center. A display on paper manufacture should be considered.

- + Lumber tools are mentioned but perhaps the Museum should consider modern lumbering methods as well as a miniature working sawmill turning out souvenir pieces of lumber to be sold as souvenirs.
- + The lumber industry is important, but there is nothing in the Museum to tell the visitor how wood is transformed into panel board or particle board or into a number of other wood products.
- + Agriculture is barely mentioned. Thought might be given to a model of a miniature dairy farm and the importance of dairying to the area. And we shouldn't forget strawberries, raspberries and asparagus.
- + Alpena's rich maritime heritage is ignored. Alpena has been a Great Lakes port for a century or more with ties to the inland seas and the high seas. Art exists with the sailors who live in Alpena and the area. They have excellent examples of genuine macarame and working cordage. A model harbor with lumber schooners and modern lake carriers unloading coal or salt and taking on loads of limestone and cement should be considered. . . Alpena based salvage operations should be considered. . . Thunder Bay has been designated as an underwater preserve. Perhaps there should be a permanent display featuring a model of an underwater wreck. . . In line with the maritime part of Alpena life are the basic rules of the road that apply to captains of Great Lakes carriers and foreign vessels as well as small boat owners and sailors . . . A "maritime center" at the museum would appeal to various organizations such as the United States Power Squadrons, the United States Coast Guard and its Auxiliary, the companies, the maritime unions and others for training purposes.
- + Also ignored is the commercial fisherman. Thousands and thousands of pounds of whitefish and other species are taken commercially in area waters. A model of a modern pond or trap net would be appropriate with perhaps a Museum produced movie.
- + A working model of a limestone quarry might be considered.
- + Graphic arts is mentioned strongly in the Five Year Plan. This should have attention, but tied strongly to Alpena's roll in the field.

This attention to industry should give industry good reason for possible special support of Museum goals.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Efforts should be made to investigate and explore the area sink holes, but not along the lines of past approaches. If the sink holes are as significant as we believe them to be, there should be a way to study them that would be satisfactory to the land owners involved as well as the scientists who would do the work, to say nothing of the visitors to the Museum to see what should be a permanent display. The legends of timber and cattle disappearing in area floods and then turning up mysteriously in Lake Huron is certainly worthy of major treatment in the Jesse Besser Museum.

The Museum's very fine planetarium does not receive nearly enough attention in tourist literature. An investment in such literature should be considered in terms of an investment with a goal of achieving a proper return.

There are art fairs at Harrisville, Alpena, Mackinaw City and elsewhere in Northern Michigan. It would seem that the Jesse Besser Museum would be a natural site for such an event during the summer tourist season. Also worthy of consideration would be a Museum art show for area high school artists.

May your reviewer suggest a permanent display that would recreate one of the many area ghost towns. In fact, it would be interesting to see a list of area towns that no longer exist.

THE GIFT SHOP

Speaking specifically of the "Eclectic Gift Shop", your reviewer would see great potential here for significant revenue from over the counter sales, and also from mail order sales that could be generated with selected but inexpensive advertising in certain publications and catalogs. Also possible is the manufacture and wholesaling of authentic souvenir merchandise to Northern Michigan gift shops. Log mark coasters would be simple and would be a natural.

Merchandise for the gift shop should be tied in with the Museum exhibits. Miniature casks that could have been made in the Museum's cooper's shop is one of dozens of ideas.

Items could be done in the Museum or elsewhere on a cottage industry basis.

Solid retail marketing management is a must, but "making a buck" at the expense of the museum's integrity could not be condoned. A fulltime, well-paid professional in this field could be well considered as the next member of the staff to be added.

NOTE ON SCIENCE

In the effort to appeal to more people on a broader base and especially in view of the Museum's educational commitment to the youth of the area, thought might be given to a Hall of Science on a "do-it-yourself" basis similar to the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry. Such an exhibit could be done with Alpena Community College Students working for credit under the direction of a paid, qualified staffer to direct it and insure quality. Newtonian physics, Boyle's law and accoustical experiments are naturals and would be immediately appealing to school children.

PROMOTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Caution is in order when turning to the promotion of the Museum and its place in the Alpena community and area. Publicity, as such, is cheap and is to be avoided. Natural developments from a strong public relations program with a corresponding attention to quality advertising is desirable with the goal of developing the Museum's image and stature while avoiding cheapness. Many brochures will be developed but a brochure is no better than the plan behind the material in the brochure.

IN SUMMARY

Due to a number of economic factors, the Jesse Besser Museum of Alpena joins with fine institutions across the nation in a battle for survival while planning for future growth and maintaining quality of service to those it serves.

The many items offered in this review, and the ideas that should naturally result, would give a basis for a program that would effectively involve local industry and business, governmental units, school districts, service clubs, historical groups and others to meet specific needs of the Museum.

In such a way, the Jesse Besser Museum will be able to become a profit-making organization for the benefit of the historical, scientific, artistic, technological and industrial educational needs of the greater Alpena community by broadening its base of service and thereby striving to derive revenues from the many.