

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts
Draft Minutes of the Virtual Briefing of the
Board of Trustees
Tuesday, August 20, 2020, 5:30pm

There were present:

Carol Ann Bischoff
Marland Buckner
Edie Cabaniss
Anne Edwards
Martha Glasser
Meg Gottwald
Jeff Humber
Suzy Palmer
Michele Peterson
Pamela Reynolds
Charlie Whitaker

Absent:

Monroe Harris, President
Gilbert Bland
Joan Brock
Cindy Conner
Betty Crutcher
Ankit Desai
Ken Dye
Janet Geldzahler
David Goode
Jil Harris
Kenneth Johnson
Andy Lewis
Steve Markel
Sara O'Keefe
Tom Papa
Hubert Phipps
Satya Rangarajan
Pam Royal
Rupa Tak
Ashlin Wilbanks
Michel Zajur

By Invitation:

Alex Nyerges
Kay Baker
Candy Banks
Stephen Bonadies
Caprice Bragg

Cammy Carleton, Council President
Stephanie Cooperstein
Jan Hatchette
Deb Love, OAG
Katie Payne
Hossein Sadid
Michael Taylor
Kimberly Wilson

I. CALL TO ORDER

Director Alex Nyerges welcomed the group and began the briefing at 5:33pm.

II. PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD

Mr. Nyerges acknowledged that there were no requests for public comments.

III. DIRECTOR'S BRIEFING

Mr. Nyerges thanked the attendees for participating in today's discussion. He said that in normal years he has the chance to see board members face to face in the galleries, at events, or in the community. Due to the need for social distancing, the temporary museum closure, and events going virtual he felt that he was missing that aspect. He hoped that casual briefings like these in between board meetings may help to bridge the gap. He noted that in order to comply with FOIA, a transcript and minutes of this virtual meeting would be made available.

a. Reopening and Attendance

Mr. Nyerges provided an update on the museum's reopening to members on July 1 and to the public on July 4. He noted that there is both good and bad news to report. The good news being that overall the reopening was successful. This success was due in large part to the efforts of the BeWell Committee. He stated that this was a group comprised of employees across all divisions of the museum. Through their work and research, the museum was able to put appropriate protocols in place such as enforcing the wearing of masks, encouraging social distancing, and providing hand sanitizer stations throughout the building. The team has been listening to feedback since reopening from visitors and employees in order to modify the protocols to best fit VMFA.

Mr. Nyerges went on to discuss the bad news. Attendance for the first month after reopening is at 35% of what staff normally expects for this time of year. However, attendance for the previous week exceeded that of museums in larger cities like Boston and Houston. Offering a major exhibit opening like *Sunken Cities* has encouraged visitation. Even so, Mr. Nyerges stated that some people are still afraid to come out. He stated that employee morale is high despite this, but that most employees do have concerns about COVID and a possible resurgence.

b. Budget and Enterprises

Mr. Nyerges shared that when the museum was closed the gift shop saw significant sales. On one Friday during the museum closure, the gift shop had \$30,000 in puzzle sales alone. He also noted that this week the Best Café began a curbside delivery service where customers can order online and then drive up to the education entrance to pick up their orders. Mr. Nyerges said this was an idea from Kimberly Wilson, Chief Operations Officer in an attempt to make up the difference from ticket sales. On the subject of ticket sales for *Sunken Cities*, he did say a thank you to Chief Curator Michael Taylor for booking the exhibition for eight months instead of the usual four thus allowing for more time for visitors to come to the museum despite COVID. He said that the museum has asked the Egyptian government for an extension on the exhibition, but that they have not responded at this moment.

Mr. Nyerges then shifted to praising the efforts of Tom Gutenberger and the advancement team for their diligence. Mr. Nyerges said that staff had used research to predict that the museum would experience a 15% decline in giving at the end of FY20 and throughout FY21. However, that was not the case. FY20 ended with a surplus, and FY21 saw an increase in contributions. Due to the original predictions more than a million dollars was carved out of the budget. Mr. Nyerges said that this forethought and the continued efforts of the team will help in making up for the loss of revenue in ticket sales.

Mr. Nyerges continued to talk about how important financial planning has been by discussing another bright point in the VMFA's summer. In 1941, the Artist Fellowship Endowment was established through a gift made by the late John Lee Pratt. Pratt stipulated that the funds be used to support professional artists in the Commonwealth and not for other purposes. Mr. Nyerges said that there was \$200,000 extra in the fellowship endowment funds, so he, Michael Taylor, Valerie Cassel Oliver, and the department for statewide programs worked together to create the Virginia Artist COVID Relief Fellowship Program. This program will provide forty working artists in Virginia with \$5,000 to help in offsetting the costs incurred by the pandemic. There were 400 applicants from all across the state. Mr. Nyerges invited the board members to watch a reception for the awardees on Tuesday, August 25 at 10am via Facebook Live.

c. External Affairs

Mr. Nyerges said that his final talking point for this update would be on external affairs. He said that most board members will remember the VMFA_Reform group's posts on social media. He said that they are still out there, but are posting less frequently. VMFA is not the only museum in the country facing a group like this. Mr. Nyerges went on to recount the story of the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art.

Mr. Nyerges went on to applaud the work of Ms. Wilson and the human resources staff for their work on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. He said that as part of that effort they are bringing in Bill Cooper to conduct trainings in each department on anti-bias, so that the whole museum can be a hospitable place for employees and visitors. He said that VMFA has met some challenges in the past. At this point he recounted some prior investigations into employee misconduct, and actions that were taken in response.

Mr. Nyerges said that another individual VMFA will be working with is Moses Foster of the West Cary Group to assist the communications division in better informing the public of the work that the museum is actively doing to increase diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility.

d. Questions

At this point, Mr. Nyerges opened the floor to questions. Ms. Anne Edwards inquired if the recipients of the Virginia Artist Relief Fellowship were VMFA members. Mr. Nyerges responded that it was not required that they be members to receive the fellowship. This led to a discussion of adding membership as a benefit of being awarded a fellowship.

Ms. Meg Gottwald asked Mr. Nyerges if there were many positive cases of COVID among VMFA employees. He responded that the museum has been very fortunate, because there has only been one confirmed case of COVID. This was found in an employee in the second week of March. He said that there have been no other positive cases, and he attributed that to the hard work of the BeWell Committee, and added that employees have access to free COVID-19 testing at any time.

Mr. Jeffery Humber then began a conversation to further discuss the diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts at VMFA. He was specifically concerned about issues of pay equity. Mr. Nyerges stated that there is not a pay equity issue at VMFA. He said that one of the accusations made by the reform group was that the museum paid African American housekeepers less than white housekeepers. As a state agency all of VMFA's positions are subject to the rules and pay guidelines set out by the Department of Human Resources Management. Mr. Nyerges emphasized that they set the minimum pay, and that VMFA pays the housekeeping staff 10% more than any other state agency. He said that the museum wants to do what is right legally and morally. He then went on to describe how the governor announced pay raises for state employees last year. These raises would not have affected part-time staff or VMFA Foundation staff. In order to ensure all employees received the same raises, the museum Foundation added \$750,000 to the budget allowing all employees to have that raise. An additional question was raised about VMFA_Reform.

At this point there were some positive comments made by Ms. Carol Ann Bischoff about the new protocols that have been implemented, the *Sunken Cities* exhibit, and dining at Amuse. Ms. Suzy Palmer echoed these positive sentiments regarding the museum's exterior campus. She has enjoyed the sculpture garden during the pandemic and is excited to utilize VMFA2Go. She asked if the virtual content the museum has provided will continue despite reopening, and Mr. Nyerges said that it would.

The final question came from Ms. Cammy Carleton, who asked for an update on the budget from the General Assembly. Mr. Nyerges said that as of this moment \$400,000 of new appropriations have been tabled. Cuts in the operating budget have not been requested, and appears that the capital projects appropriated in FY19, which includes the VMFA expansion project, remain intact. Mr. Nyerges reiterated that nothing is set in stone, but things are looking positive. Mr. Hossein Sadid commented that the advisory

board has not scaled back allocation for debt capacity. Mr. Nyerges also applauded the work of advancement and the generosity of donors in doubling the total for the Capital Campaign.

IV. OTHER BUSINESS/ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, the briefing was ended at 6:27pm.

Recorded by: Stephanie Cooperstein
Administrative and Project Coordinator, Office of the Director