

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts
Draft Transcript of the Trustees Ad Hoc External Affairs Sub-Committee Meeting
Tuesday, March 27, 2021, 1:00 – 1:30pm
Electronic Meeting

Meeting called to order at 1:03pm.

Full attendance listed in the meeting minutes.

Janet Geldzahler: Okay, I would like to call the meeting to order. In accordance with the requirements for electronic meetings under the Freedom of Information Act, a transcript of this meeting, along with the meeting minutes, will be posted. In accordance with the requirements for virtual meetings, we offered a public comment period. There were no requests for public comment, so we will proceed. I would like to turn it over to Michael and then Katie.

Michael Taylor: Thank you very much, Janet. Welcome everyone. I wanted to give you a bit of the background on this land acknowledgement that you have in front of you. The VMFA's interest in doing this dates back to when we had an exhibition called *Hear My Voice*, which was about traditional and contemporary Native American art. It was discussed then as something that the museum should consider. Many museums have done similar land acknowledgments and a lot of colleges and universities. I know that Lynette is on this call. She has been involved with The College of William and Mary and its efforts to go in this direction. Really, where it came to a head was in discussing the strategic plan. The next one, the one we are currently in, 2021-2025. Hearing the curators' feedback that they really felt it was important, especially since we have a curator of Native American art. One of the things that we have started to do is really put a focus on Virginia Native artists. A lot of the feedback that we get is, "Well, have you done a land acknowledgement?" We felt it was time. I worked with primarily Johanna Minich, who is the Curator of Native American Art, but also several other key stakeholders at the museum in drafting this: Celeste Fetta, Courtney Morano in our Education Department, Caprice Bragg, who is on this call, and Alex and the Division Heads. We looked at what other museums have done. I would also mention Cindy Norwood, because she really made it clear when she reviewed it that she wanted to make sure that we were not vulnerable for a future claim. She came up with language about presence on the land, rather than something more forthright like "inhabited the land." It has been a really great and inclusive process. My partner with this has also been Katie Payne because our plan all along has been after the land acknowledgement is approved by the Trustees to take this to the Secretary of the Commonwealth Kelly Thomasson, who, as you may know, is the head of Native Affairs for Virginia. She will share it with the 11 Tribes. There are seven federally recognized and three others that are also recognized by the state. That is all in the language so that is where we arrived at a draft that we felt was good enough to share with the External Affairs Committee. You have a copy of it. The plan if it gets approved and goes to the Tribes and is ratified would be to have a plaque at the entrance of the museum, signage in the Native American Gallery in Evans Court, and to put something on the website. That would be where this language would live. I think that covers where we are but we are really excited to get questions and feedback.

Janet Geldzahler: Katie, did you have something you wanted to share with us on the process?

Katie Payne: No, I think Michael covered it, but we have vetted it with the Secretary of Education

and his team. Then it went to the Secretary of the Commonwealth, and Courtney Wynn who is under Secretary Thomasson. She is the Director of Indigenous and Native American Outreach. Between the two of them they made a few tweaks, but they have offered, as Michael said, to send it to the Tribes. We thought it would have greater weight and we would hear back maybe more quickly if it came from the Governor's Office. They are just waiting for us to finish our internal approval process and then they are ready to help. They are very excited to do it.

Janet Geldzahler: Okay, I will open it up to discussion by everyone. I had one substantive comment. Where we say, "The museum seeks to honor our place in the history of this land." It seems to me that phrase can be misinterpreted into saying we are honoring ourselves.

Michael Taylor: That is a good catch. I was actually reading this myself and wondering about that. That might have been somehow in the edits. Who is the "our?" That is certainly something we can amend.

Janet Geldzahler: You could say "to honor the Tribes," "these Tribes," or "honor the history of this land on which the museum is situated." I was not quite sure whether we were talking about honoring the land or the Tribes.

Michael Taylor: It actually might be stronger to just say "seeks to honor the history of this land." Then it covers everyone.

Janet Geldzahler: Other questions or comments?

Pamela Reynolds: My only question, which I wrote to Michael about, was whether or not this was the beginning of something else. I am not just talking about the statement. I am not being negative. I think we should. I just want to question. This is how it started on every sort of thing. It starts slowly and then you get support. In the end, is it going to be something else, like in Canada? It started out and now it is a whole other issue in Canada. They just appropriated \$2 million of the land back. My only question was whether or not, supposedly, they have hired a public relations firm in Virginia to begin to promote this? A regular lobbyist? My only question was to be aware that this could possibly lead to something else down the road and that was my only hesitation. I talked to Michael about it and Caprice. That was my question.

Cindy Norwood: The attorneys for the different museums and the public higher education entities were all worried, as well. That is why we tweaked it such that it would not invite a claim, but we are worried about that as well.

Pamela Reynolds: Yes, thank you. It is not a negative at all. I think that was a couple years ago, but with the recognition that the HB1980 Bill that has just passed the General Assembly which the five state institutions who tragically had the enslaved build the universities are now giving back scholarships. The University of Virginia was like maybe 7,000. I am just saying. Cindy, you said that you were watching it too? That was not a criticism. I just wanted us to consider. Cindy, you just said that you have the same thoughts, so thank you.

Cindy Norwood: I am very aware of that situation. One of my other clients is VMI.

Pamela Reynolds: Well, we are all involved with UVA, or I am because of Monticello. It is just a

situation that is a positive, but it gets cumbersome, as you know. That was my only thought about this. If you are on top of it, then I will sleep. I felt bad when I wrote Michael about it and Caprice, but I am glad that you are looking at it also because it is complicated. Do you think that this could be the beginning of that with a public relations firm being hired and things?

Cindy Norwood: Yes, ma'am and I think it could. That is why it is important that we note that there was a presence but no one can say for sure that anyone actually, on the land that VMFA owns, lived there. The last thing we want to do is give somebody the ability to say, "Well, even you say we lived there." We are going to say you had a presence but no one knows who actually lived there. I defy anybody to be able to prove who actually lived there. We are just going to be very careful with our wording. We think that VMFA reaches out to every type of person in Virginia. It would be horrible for all Virginians of all races, ethnicities, or cultures, if something were to happen to VMFA. You all have a duty to protect the VMFA and I think that is what we all want to do.

Pamela Reynolds: Right. It is interesting that, in this particular case, it is only the state institutions. It is the same. It is UVA. It is William and Mary. Now we are included in this lump. I do not mean lump, but in this recognition. It seems to be the state institutions that are being brought into this. As a state institution, I just thought it was interesting that it is really the same ones being involved in this. I do not mean to delay it. I am glad.

Michael Taylor: I do not think it is so much a state thing because what I am seeing is that this is something that is now so widespread and so commonplace that in fact we are a little behind. I think private colleges and private universities and private art museums, especially if there is a Native presence, want to engage with the Native community. We have this great Native American art collection. We are finding that this is sort of holding us back. I say that because I was on a program this week with a Virginia Native American artist called Raven Custalow who is a Mattaponi Tribe member. I did not do any kind of land acknowledgement because I did not feel that we had actually ratified this enough yet to make that happen. She did it. She spoke very powerfully about her place in Virginia and the history. I think you are right, Pam, for thinking ahead about the possible legal ramifications 20, 30, 50 years down the line but that is not the spirit we are going into it with. It is more about making VMFA welcoming and inclusive for everyone and taking the steps where you do feel welcomed and included. We have Cindy. As I said, she is really the key because I think any substantive changes to this needs to be run by her. That way she is clear that if you say that then this is what this means in a legal system.

Pamela Reynolds: It may be that it is not 50 years. That it is closer. Cindy is on top of that and we have a new Governor coming in and a new Attorney General. We are in the middle. I just am glad you are on top of it.

Cindy Norwood: Well, one good thing is that a lot of us are in the same boat, so it would be a lot of people helping each other to deal with any particular situation. It is really not like VMI, UVA, or William and Mary. That situation where it can be proved that enslaved individuals did in fact help with the building of those institutions, whereas no one can prove who actually lived on the land that VMFA holds. That is one good thing. Again, I did change the language so that it would not indicate that we even think that somebody did live there.

Janet Geldzahler: Cindy, then do we need to change the language in the second paragraph? The first paragraph acknowledges the presence, but the second paragraph says "nurture our relationship with

its original inhabitants.” That seems to me to say they live there.

Cindy Norwood: Virginia’s original inhabitants? Can somebody bring up the language?

Pamela Royal: I was going to make that point too.

Cindy Norwood: If that is saying the VMFA inhabitants, we do not want that.

Janet Geldzahler: We need to fix that then.

Cindy Norwood: We need to fix that. Sometimes I do not see the last version of something.

Janet Geldzahler: It is in the third paragraph, the second line.

Cindy Norwood: It should say “...with Virginia's original inhabitants” or something like that or take that out.

Janet Geldzahler: We could just say “...with these tribes.”

Cindy Norwood: Yes.

Michael Taylor: That is much better, “...maintain and nurture our relationships with these tribes,” because that paragraph is really about partnerships. It is forward looking.

Pamela Royal: That was the only thing that I had noticed.

Cindy Norwood: I need to see what the digital says. We need to take it out of there as well or add with these tribes.

Michael Taylor: We can make those two changes very easily.

Janet Geldzahler: Shall we go ahead and take a vote on those changes? Are we now recommending this to the Committee as a whole? Is everyone who is on the Sub-Committee in favor of that? I am.

Pamela Royal: Yes.

Lynette Allston: This is one Lynette. Can I give you a comment from a Native perspective? This acknowledgement is much more detailed than many of the others that I have heard. A lot of them are much more, for lack of a better word, in a spiritual realm. I think this is good, I like it. I think that the present day tribes will appreciate being mentioned. But, more importantly, you have also acknowledged the fact that there are many tribes that were in the Commonwealth that are no longer here. Their names are on rivers, state parks, even highway signs. Those are good remembrances. I like the fact this talks about the presence of tribes at first contact. I have not heard, other than a discussion about education of Virginia's Native American young people at state institutions, about having some sort of special benefit. The land part has not been a discussion in the world that I interact with. I think the changes you have suggested with that last paragraph are very appropriate because you do not want to leave something that could be misinterpreted. The one other point that I noticed is in what you wanted to add as a link to a website. You suggested the Virginia Indian

Heritage Trail Book. That is very old now. It is from 2008 and now there is more information that has been included. Virginia Humanities is actually expanding the Encyclopedia Virginia, which is much more informative about Virginia's tribes and continues to add information. I may suggest that you use that as the link to more informative about Virginia tribes. Another site that is excellent is the Virginia Department of Education site, specifically with the Virginia tribes, because it not only has the narrative information, it also has a film. Those are my comments. I think this is an excellent thing for VMFA to be moving forward. Other states and other places have already done land acknowledgments. At most events that I go to now, I hear a land acknowledgement, so thank you.

Michael Taylor: Thank you, Lynnette. That is excellent feedback. You had sent those links earlier, so thank you for that. I should say Lynette has also been really helping us with our current exhibition, *Virginia Arcadia*, which is about the Natural Bridge. I think what you just said was excellent. You brought up the fact that a lot of the other land acknowledgement statements tend to be very short. We wanted to be inclusive because that is part of why we are doing this. We like to represent everyone, have you see yourself. This is great, thank you.

Janet Geldzahler: Michael, is it contemplated that we are going to actually have an acknowledgement at every event?

Michael Taylor: No, I think that is something that is up for discussion. We are starting with this land acknowledgement to get the language right and have it, as I said, on our website. I certainly feel if we have an event like we did the other night with a Native American artist, it is highly appropriate then. I think that is still to be decided. Another thing that that we have not decided is how we will announce this. November is Native American Heritage Month. It might be good to tie in there. We have a Native American film series, The Pocahontas Film Festival, which could also give us an opportunity to do so. I think as Lynette was saying, this is very commonplace now to do land acknowledgments. I cannot foresee us doing it at every event or every lecture, but that might change.

Lynette Allston: I just wanted to suggest that you have a shorter version that you use on occasion. There is a shorter version that is used by William and Mary, so it could be a portion of this particular statement. Maybe even that last paragraph, but consider doing an abbreviated version.

Michael Taylor: We have the William and Mary [acknowledgement], so I can look at that. This would be a lot to read.

Lynette Allston: They actually have another version. They have a long version but there is one that is given prior to a special event, not at all special events, but just at some. I think it is having at least acknowledged in the beginning of an event that the institution is connected and understands and wants to honor the history of the location.

Michael Taylor: Great, thank you.

Carol Ann Bischoff: We share the campus with two other, at least one is a state institution, the History Museum and then the Daughters of the Confederacy. We are near them. I was just wondering if they are also working on this because the land is certainly close by.

Cindy Norwood: Those are not state agencies, Carol Ann.

Alex Nyerges: That is private property.

Carol Ann Bischoff: Okay.

Alex Nyerges: The state gave that land away 60 or 70 years ago with the UDC and then longer to what is now the Historical Society, so it is private land.

Michael Taylor: We could ask Jamie. I mean the Virginia Museum of History and Culture does have Native American artifacts on display, so we could ask Jamie if they are planning anything. The Daughters, I doubt.

Carol Ann Bischoff: Okay, thank you.

Michael Taylor: Thank you.

Alex Nyerges: It is a good question. Clearly at one time it was all state-owned property before the state gave it away.

Carol Ann Bischoff: You know the Indian tribes in Virginia, it is not just 400 years. They were here 10,000 years before the Europeans, right? The land is not all that far from our premises, so private or state, I would think they are dealing with, or might be dealing with, the same issue.

Michael Taylor: For all we know, the Virginia Museum of History and Culture is planning this. Many museums, many institutions are doing this right now. That is an easy one to ask. I do not think we need to reach out to the Daughters.

Carol Ann Bischoff: No, I would not do that. Thank you.

Janet Geldzahler: Okay, could I go back then and see that we have a consensus to recommend this to the Committee? Pam and I already said yes. Carol Ann, are you good? Yes? Nice. Pam Reynolds? Okay, great. It is unanimous. Michael, what are the next steps?

Michael Taylor: Let me ask you a question. Does that mean this is approved? Are we bringing this back to the full Board for a vote?

Pamela Royal: What we reported out from the Committee was that we were going to bring it to the Committee, but to the full Board, ultimately, for ratification, as I recollect and think would be appropriate.

Michael Taylor: So I think next steps are a vote for the June board. Then it goes to Secretary of the Commonwealth, Mary Thomasson, to send out to the 11 tribes. Then, if we aim, I think that timing is actually pretty good if we are looking at a November dedication/announcement because then that would be Native American Heritage Month.

Pamela Royal: Sounds good.

Michael Taylor: Katie, does that work for you?

Kenneth Johnson: Michael, as a point of clarity, does the Governor's Office or anything need to approve or be okay with the changes, or the Secretary need to be okay with the changes we have made?

Katie Payne: They will see it, Ken, when we send it back. No, I think the changes they wanted are still in. We have not changed anything that they put in today so I think it will be fine. I will let them know when we send it back after the full Board vote that we have made a few tweaks and if they would review it one more time before sending it out. But I think they are very comfortable with it.

Kenneth Johnson: Got it. I did not know if it made sense to send them a draft version for them to be okay with before we took it to the Board for approval and a vote.

Katie Payne: Oh, sure. Yes, great idea. I will be glad to do that.

Kenneth Johnson: Okay.

Pamela Reynolds: My only thought is that we have a healthy conversation when it is presented to the Board. I do not know how you make this a concise presentation. I guess Ken does, Pam or whoever does, but I think it would be helpful. The background, the discussion today was very helpful and for a Board hearing it for the first time, I think the explanation, I do not know how the explanation can be done.

Kenneth Johnson: I think Pam and Michael will do a great job with that.

Pamela Royal: We did introduce it at the last Board meeting. I spoke briefly, not at length, so it will not come, they are expecting to hear in more detail in June.

Michael Taylor: Right.

Janet Geldzahler: Well, I think one helpful thing is to address the point that Pam raised, which is that we are very conscious of the legal issue and talk about presence. I was just looking at the George Mason one where they say it belongs to them, so they have gone all the way in terms of, you know, [undecipherable].

Cindy Norwood: Yikes is all I can say.

Michael Taylor: They did not have Cindy Norwood.

Cindy Norwood: Thank you, Michael.

Alex Nyerges: What did George Mason say?

Janet Geldzahler: It said originally, the land originally belongs to whichever tribe it was.

Alex Nyerges: Hmm. Yes, well, you know, let me just say, Cindy, thank you for being such a good lawyer. But it bears saying, at least from my perspective, that what little we are doing here at the moment folks is little. All we are doing is acknowledging the Native American people who, whether we call it inhabited this land or own this land, the reality is the ownership rights in the minds of

Native Americans was very different than the Western European countries who took this land, I will just say stole the land, from the native tribes. Now they looked at land ownership in a very different way, because it was communal, and everyone, it was part of everybody within the tribal group. It was not that you could trade it. You did not own a lot. And for us, and Cindy, do not get me wrong, I am glad you are looking out for our legal issues, but this is a Commonwealth of Virginia concern in that regard, not a Virginia Museum of Fine Arts concern. Our concern should be only focused on making a statement that acknowledges the fact that Native American, Virginian Native Americans, inhabited this land, however we want to call that, because the reality is the lands were stolen by the colonists. There is no nice way to say that. It is what happened. All you have to do is read the history of Native American treaties in America over the last 400 and something years. Every one of them, for the most part, has been destroyed, torn up, burnt, stomped on, and then traded into something else. So it is a despicable history for which we all need to bear responsibility and what little we can do by saying what we are saying here and acknowledging the land and the people who originally inhabited it is small. So I am glad we are doing this. Quite frankly, my mind is spinning right now. Lynette, I turn to you to think about other things that we, as an art museum, need to do with respect to Native Americans in Virginia. I do not know what that is but certainly the more we can do of substance beyond just the words, to me, would be a direction. We do, obviously, a number of things already, we are collecting more, collecting contemporary. So we are making great efforts in that regard but I think it would be great to have more dialogue to talk about what else do we need to do as an art museum in a positive fashion, looking forward.

Lynette Allston: Thank you, thank you Alex. So many of the current, the present day Virginia tribes are trying to rebuild their cultural heritage and finding we do not have venues where we can have that expression or share what we are reclaiming. So all of your words, and certainly I will share with you as I get more information from my friends as to the needs from our Virginia tribes, our present day tribes. I just wanted to make a point on the George Mason land acknowledgement. All of those tribes are those tribes I spoke about which do not have a voice any longer, they do not exist. Piscataway is in Maryland. But those others were wiped out, so to speak, 400 years ago. So I was happy to see those words, those names, included in the George Mason acknowledgement because it indicates they know who occupied that land years, centuries ago. So it is a good history point. I certainly will share as I get more information, as our tribes begin to expand and build our cultural footprint again, I will definitely share that information. So, thank you.

Michael Taylor: Thank you, Lynette. One of our goals, so when we did the *Hear My Voice* exhibition, that was when for the first time we realized that we actually did not have a single Native Virginia artist in the collection, not one. Since that time Johanna has been systematically acquiring these works and, in many cases, she has had to commission them from artists to make a piece for the museum collection. So one thing you could do which would be a big favor for me, Lynette, and that is let me know if there are artists and craftsmen in your tribe who we could talk to about this because we would love to get a far greater representation of Virginia artists. Obviously that would come out of acquisition funds and in the usual way, but thank you.

Cindy Norwood: We may be able to contact the Chiefs also. My dad was close friends with Chief Custalow. They are both in heaven now. You know, they want to be, they want to have, you know, closeness with the community. I think that from all the agencies I have been the attorney for, a lot of agencies, and there is no agency that tries harder to be inclusive than the VMFA. I am just very proud to be your attorney. By the way, I am part Cherokee and part Powhatan.

Alex Nyerges: There you go.

Lynette Allston: Well, I was going to say you know Cherokee are not included. Cherokee lived along the mountains that was the whole western ridge mountains in Virginia, that was Cherokee territory. So when I speak about those who do not have a voice any longer, Cherokee is one of those tribes. And I will share we do have artists who are in my tribe who have things on exhibit at Jamestown settlement right now. They have an exhibition of Virginia native artisans going on right now and they are planning to have a traveling exhibit so I will get the word out.

Michael Taylor: Thank you, Lynnette.

Lynette Allston: Okay, thank you.

Kenneth Johnson: Thanks everyone for joining the call today. I think this has been great. Janet, thank you for your leadership. Of course when we have the next Committee meeting we will report out. We all agree that Katie will send this over to the Secretary's Office in draft form?

Caprice Bragg: Katie is no longer on the line. She had to leave but we will take care of that absolutely.

Kenneth Johnson: Okay, and following that will bring it back to the Committee to present to the full Board at full Board meeting and take action in June. Correct?

Caprice Bragg: Yes.

Kenneth Johnson: Sounds good. Well, again, thank you all for taking time out your busy schedules and taking this opportunity seriously. I really appreciate it and I hope we have it right. All of us have interpreted the Bible and many other publications in many ways so this will be another opportunity for folks to interpret this document in the best way. So have a great one.

Meeting adjourned at 1:40pm.

Transcribed by: Stephanie Cooperstein
Executive Administrator to the Chief Strategy Officer and Deputy Director
for Strategic Planning, Government and Board Relations