

SPRING 2001

NEWSStandard

What's the BIG IDEA?

This feature presents the history, theory or critical points of the theme to provide a broad context for the issue.

Collections Stewardship: "The Big Picture" in Accreditation and MAP Peer Review

Elizabeth Merritt, Assistant Director, Museum Assessment Program

Just as the well-being of a museum's collections is integral to the museum's health, the collections themselves cannot be considered "healthy" except in the context of a well-run, well-managed organization. For this reason, any assessment of collections stewardship should start with the "big picture" before proceeding to details. This approach allows staff to examine how collections stewardship is integrated into the museum's planning, operations, and budgeting. One goal of AAM is to foster a common understanding of the standards and best practices applied in Accreditation and Museum Assessment Program reviews. The ideas in article are based primarily on the Accreditation Commission's ongoing discussions regarding best practices and their written "Expectations". It also draws on the opinions of MAP and Accreditation peer reviewers as reflected in their written reports. This article identifies questions that every peer reviewer should ask in assessing the ability of a museum to fulfill its collections stewardship responsibilities. AAM staff consult a variety of sources in researching the field's views regarding standards and best practices.

Are the collections appropriate for the museum?

All museums have limited resources, and to fulfill their stewardship responsibilities museums need to make thoughtful, strategic choices about whether, what, and when to collect. The content of the collections should be guided by a tiered system of controls—for

example, the mission statement, institutional plans, scope of collections statement, and collecting plan. All accreditable museums must have a mission statement, institutional plan, and a comprehensive collections management policy (which typically includes a statement on scope of collections). "These documents describe the stories the museum will tell," points out Barbara Silberman, Director of the Heritage Investment Program, "and the collections should help to tell these stories." Taken alone, however, mission statements and scope of collections statements are often

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THEME

This issue of *NEWSStandard* explores **collections stewardship**: the "big picture" relationship between collections management and the rest of a museum's operations.

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What's the Big Idea

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broadly stated, and are of limited use in guiding specific choices. Consequently, some museums use collecting plans to refine and build upon their mission and vision statements (see sidebar “Evolving Standards: Collecting Plans”). Peer reviewers should assess whether the control the museum exerts over the content of the collections ensures that material is appropriate, supports the museum’s mission, plans, and goals, and is sustainable within the museum’s resources.

Museums exert control over the content of collections in two ways:

1. Selection of new material that is appropriate to the museum’s mission and plans
2. Deaccessioning of material that is not.

Many factors may make collections candidates for responsible deaccessioning, for example:

Σ The museum’s mission or focus may have changed, rendering some material irrelevant or peripheral.

Σ The museum’s resources may have changed, limiting its ability to provide appropriate care.

Σ The museum’s standards may have changed—in the past the organization may have accepted material that would not meet current tests for relevance to mission or resources for appropriate care.

In any case, maintaining collections that do not belong in the organization diverts resources that could be spent on care of collections central to the museum’s mission and activities. On the other hand, trying to maintain collections that are appro-

EVOLVING STANDARDS: COLLECTING PLANS

Currently, few museums have collecting plans that outline more specifically what the museum will collect in support of the museum’s long-term vision for exhibits, education, and research. The Accreditation Self-Study Questionnaire, currently under revision, will now ask for a “collecting plan” or “collections development plan” as an optional attachment. There is disagreement in the field over whether having a collecting plan constitutes “best practices” for all museums, or is only appropriate in certain circumstances. Peer reviewer Steve Germann, former director of the Henry Ford Museum, Dearborn, Mich., feels it is a good expectation, though one that will be new to many peer reviewers. “A collecting plan is an interesting, hybrid document” he points out. “It stands with one foot in the collections policies—related, as it is, to the mission statement and the scope of collections statement—and one foot in the institutional plan, another document AAM Accreditation standards insists that museums have.” However, there is appears to be little consensus that a collecting plan is necessary or appropriate for all museums. Staff from some art museums indicate a collecting plan may actually be of little practical value.

What do you think? Does having a collecting plan constitute “best practice?” Let us know your point of view. We will print a cross section of your comments in a future issue of NEWStandard. We are also interested in receiving sample collecting plans for TIS.

appropriate but for which the museum cannot provide appropriate care can also be an abrogation of the public trust. For these reasons, it is reasonable to expect a museum to be actively engaged in deaccessioning material that does not fit the museum's mission or resources.

Does the museum have the resources to support the collections?

Each museum must ensure that it can provide a level of care appropriate to the material it chooses to collect. This level of care may vary according to the nature and types of material in question (for example, hands-on collections in a children's museum may need a less rigorous standard of care than do old masterworks in an art museum.) A museum may meet this standard through two processes: selecting material for which it can provide appropriate care (e.g., capacity of storage, environmental controls, staff expertise) and aggressively pursuing and allocating resources to collections care. In order to ensure that it identifies and obtains appropriate resources, the museum's collections planning must be integrated into its overall institutional planning and financial planning processes. Questions to consider include:

- Σ How will the museum's storage needs change over 10 years?
- Σ Is this projection integrated into plans for the next capital campaign?
- Σ What are the ongoing costs of new acquisitions, and is this factored into yearly operating budget increases?
- Σ What additional staff will be needed to care for the collections, and are these positions included in the museum's documented institutional plans?

Peer reviewers should look for evi-

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Collections Stewardship Case Study: The Valentine Richmond History Center

Bill Martin, Director, Valentine Richmond History Center

Over the past two years, the Valentine Richmond History Center's staff and board have been engaged in those difficult yet essential conversations about the museum and its mission through a reevaluation of its role among Richmond and Virginia cultural institutions. The process challenged the History Center to ask fundamental questions about all areas of operations and programming. New trustees challenged fundamental assumptions about the History Center and its mission. Why do changing exhibitions? Are lecture and school programs necessary? What does our decorative arts collection have to do with Richmond history? These questions provided the perfect opportunity to educate the new leadership and remind those with long service of the role and responsibilities of a museum and its board. In our committees and staff meetings, we focused on creating a viable and lively new vision for the future.

Our strategic plan clearly articulates this vision for the Valentine. Key elements of this plan include:

- Σ A new name and image campaign for the museum that more clearly identifies the museum's mission for the public—Valentine Richmond History Center;
- Σ A master plan for the History Center's facilities that provides the blueprint for the History Center's growth at its downtown location, including improved collections storage, support spaces, and public amenities;
- Σ A critical evaluation of the

History Center's exhibitions and programs that focuses on audience development and earned income potential and;

- Σ Recruitment of new board and staff leadership that reflects the changing role of the museum in the community.

Collections and their care and management emerged as the highest priority strategic issue for the History Center. During the planning process the board became aware (many for the first time) of the magnitude and importance of the Valentine Richmond History Center's collections. With more than 1 million objects and 1 million photographs, the collections were clearly the institution's largest asset as well as its greatest challenge.

From its well-known costume and textile collection to vast decorative arts collections, the History Center broadly documents the history of the City of Richmond. Staff developed a major collections management initiative that will transform the management and care of the collections. This plan calls for:

- Σ Purchase of new collections management software that would provide significantly improved access to and intellectual control of the collection;
- Σ Recruitment of appropriate staff to support the initiative;
- Σ Evaluation and upgrade of existing storage facilities;
- Σ Development of a collection plan that would support the mission and interpretative agenda of the History Center and;

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[On the Ground]

This feature incorporates the theme into the practical work of peer reviewers.

It's about Asking the Right Questions

Gay Bindocci, Associate Curator, Office of Senate Curator, U.S. Capitol

This article will suggest ways in which we, as Accreditation and MAP peer reviewers, can assess how well the museum is fulfilling its stewardship responsibilities. These suggestions provide a basis for conducting the Map or Accreditation review.

Assessing appropriateness of the collections:

- Allow time before the site visit to review the museum's application and self-study materials. A thorough understanding of the mission, scope of collections, collection management plan, exhibits, programs, issues, and statistics on the collections will facilitate the on-site evaluation process

- Schedule and confirm meetings

with the director; governing authority members; staff responsible for, or who work with, the collections; and appropriate volunteers. Propose an agenda that allows you to speak with each one individually—it is important to get their perspectives on how the museum functions.

- Meet with the staff to discuss how, when, and by whom each of the collections-related documents was developed.

- Ask how the collections came into being, the size of the collection, the objects on exhibit and who plans/designs/installs the exhibits, the current collecting activity, and who serves on which committees, i.e., exhibits, programs. It is impor-

tant to identify who is responsible for acquiring collections and who has the authority to accept objects.

Assessing museum resources for collections support:

- Examine the financial statements to determine whether the budget supports the documentation, staffing, conservation, storage, exhibition, and research needs of the collections.

- Compare the staffing for programs, loans, and activities with the museum's activities in these areas.

- Determine whether there a Friends group that provides support. If yes, in what capacity does it function?

- Chat with various staff and volunteers to see if all interested parties have the same level of understanding regarding available resources and expenditures.

TAKE-ALONG TIPS

This feature includes suggestions from peer reviewers to make your work easier and more effective.

MAP/Accreditation Tip

Jane Pieplow, Churchill County Museum & Archives, Fallon, NY.

I remember a site visit I did a few years ago that was scheduled on the two busiest days on the museum's calendar. Despite squeezing discussions in around event preparations, we got the work done, but I did not feel like I had the attention of the museum staff or board members. Because of this experience, I now ask that site visits be scheduled between these types of events. I suggest during agenda setting that relevant people reserve plenty of time for the visit. Otherwise, I feel that the museum is losing the benefit of the visit.

Accreditation Tip

Lynette Pohlman, Brunnier Art Museum, Iowa State University, Ames

As early in the visit as possible I 1) thank the museum staff for all their effort preparing for the visit, and 2) to emphasize that the Accreditation Visiting Committee's role is to review the written materials and observe the museum in relation to that material. These are important things to say to the entire staff and to the governing body, so I repeat them with any new group. They need to know that we are observers. In that role, we do not make recommendations to the museum during the visit or in the report. I also ask them to be as open as possible and, at end of each session, to add something that I wasn't wise enough to ask about. In order to make sure I

am representing AAM accurately, I always refer to the Visiting Committee Handbook to refresh my memory and be consistent.

MAP Tip

Susan McLeod, Chippewa Valley Museum, Eau Claire, Wis.

I love everything about being a MAP Surveyor except writing the report, because it is so time-consuming. For the Governance MAP pilot site report, I used the "Critical Issues Checklist" in the Surveyor Handbook to allow me to outline the report clearly and point out key observations for each element and focus the majority of my energy on the issues that were primary to this institution. This cut my writing time in half.

PEER REVIEWER MANAGER'S CORNER

Recruiting F Supporting F Developing Peer Reviewers

RED FLAGS

- Only one staff member knows how to access the collections
- Staff members do not know the mission
- Lack of scope of collections statement and/or a collecting plan
- Confusion as to reporting and decision-making structure
- Authority and decision-making not broadly shared
- Collections do not support the mission

Assessing integration of collections into the work of the museum:

• Ask how the staff perceives the collections and how the objects are integrated into the activities of the museum.

• Read the museum's planning documents—do they address exhibits, research, programs, conservation, storage, and staffing needs?

• Find out how are exhibit themes determined and by whom. Who serves on the exhibit committee?

• If the museum is engaged in research, is that research shared through publications, exhibits, and outreach activities?

Assessing organizational characteristics supporting good stewardship:

• Spend some time to familiarize yourself with the organizational structure of the museum. Is there a logical flow in the staff reporting structure? Are the lines of authority and responsibility clearly defined? Does the curator/collection manager have a direct line of communication to the director and a seat on relevant committees?

• Is there a plan that allows staff to take an active role in the decision-making process, and does the local

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This issue focuses on collections stewardship, an area in which AAM has been tracking trends and emerging issues. To provide guidance to museums in the Accreditation Program, the Accreditation Commission recently issued Expectations on Collections Stewardship. This document, like previously issued Expectations, refines and expands upon key documents or areas of operations as stated in Museum Accreditation: Criteria and Characteristics. A copy of this new Expectation is inserted in this issue of NEWStandard.

In your work as peer reviewers, the Expectations are helpful in defining clearly what the current standards and best practices are for a particular area of operations. For an Accreditation assignment, the Expectations are as important as the Museum Accreditation: Criteria and Characteristics in guiding your visit and report. For a MAP assignment, the Expectations help the peer reviewer and museum understand the current standards and are useful in setting goals for improvements. The five previously approved Expectations, as well as Position Statements and Museum Accreditation: Criteria and Characteristics, are located on the Accreditation Web page (www.aam-us.org/accred.htm).

This issue of NEWStandard also offers several perspectives on collections stewardship and ideas for integrating the new Expectation in your work as a peer reviewer. Feedback from peer reviewers who reviewed the draft of the "What's the BIG IDEA" article revealed that, for some aspects of collections stewardship, consensus in the field has not been reached. I encourage you to send in any comments that might advance the conversation among your peer reviewer colleagues and in the field in general. In a future issue, we will publish a cross-section of key points from your feedback.

The NEWStandard: A resource for AAM peer reviewers builds the community of peer reviewers, enhances the ties between museum professionals, and fosters communication and idea sharing. We welcome your feedback, tips, references, and new ideas. I look forward to hearing from you all.



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REFERENCE DESK

This feature provides annotated references of articles, Web sites, books, and more that relate to the theme. You are encouraged to submit annotated references that you have found especially helpful.

Museum Policy & Procedure for Holocaust-Era Issues (Technical Information Service, American Association of Museums, 2001).

Available through the AAM Bookstore

Learn how museums have incorporated the AAM's *Guidelines Concerning Unlawful Appropriation of Objects During the Nazi Era* in their own policies. Includes samples of collections policies and procedures, the latest version of the AAM *Guidelines*, forms, and position descriptions.

Implementing the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (Technical Information Service, American Association of Museums, 2001).

Available through the AAM Bookstore

After a decade of experience with NAGPRA, museums have compiled policies, ethical statements, and collaborated successfully with tribes. Includes long-term collections policies and procedures, and guidelines for collaboration and claims are provided. The latest NAGPRA regulations.

CoOL: Conservation OnLine

<http://palimpsest.stanford.edu>

CoOL, a project of the Preservation Department of Stanford University Libraries, is a full text library of conservation information, covering a wide spectrum of topics of interest to those involved with the conservation of library, archives, and museum materials. It provides current technical information, articles about rapidly evolving ethical and philosophical issues, FAQs, and policy documents on audio materials, copyright and intellectual property rights, digital imaging, disaster planning, electronic records, environment, health and safety, bibliographies and resource guides, a dictionary/glossary, and links to preservation-related organizations.

"Writing a Collections Management Policy"

www.aam-us.org/tiswcmp.htm

This document provides a brief summary of the issues that may be addressed in a collections management policy: scope of collections, acquisitions, loans, deaccessioning, conservation and care, records and inventory, access, insurance, reproduction and copyright, NAGPRA and other laws, education and research collections, public disclosure, and special ethical situations.

Current Issues in Collections Stewardship: Mastering the Essentials

February 1 – 2, 2002, Philadelphia

Offered by AAM as part of its ongoing Professional Education Programs, this seminar will address the question of how a museum can ensure that the objects it owns, borrows, holds in custody, and/or uses are available and accessible to present and future generations. For more information, contact AAM Professional Education Programs by e-mail at seminar@aam-us.org, by phone at 202-289-9114, or visit the Web site, www.aam-us.org.

HOW TO USE THE AAM TECHNICAL INFORMATION SERVICE (TIS)

TIS is available to AAM institutional members, and to MAP and Accreditation peer reviewers on a once-per-assignment basis. TIS provides material on a wide variety of topics of interest to museums in the form of brochures, FAQ sheets, sample policies, articles, and resource lists. We encourage you to use TIS to prepare for a visit, and to append TIS material to MAP Assessment Reports. When contacting TIS, be as specific as possible about your needs. You can contribute to the quality of TIS materials by giving us feedback on the usefulness of material sent to you, and recommending material for use by TIS.

On the Ground

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audience have a voice? Who has the final decision on exhibitions, programs, and collections acquisition?

ÿ Meet with the staff to get their perception as to how the organization works.

Writing the report:

ÿ A wrap-up meeting provides an opportunity to ensure that issues of concern are being addressed and nothing has been overlooked.

ÿ For Map visits, present a verbal report of findings to the director

and appropriate staff, e.g. the museum's MAP Assessment Team. Discuss your preliminary findings and recommendations.

ÿ For Accreditation visits, the Accreditation Visiting Committee team should meet before leaving the museum and mutually agree on any areas of concern and identify questions that need to be discussed with the museum director during the exit interview.

ÿ In the written report, present an overview, summarize accomplish-

ments, and identify areas that need improvement. Address issues in a professional, yet a friendly manner, keeping in mind staff capabilities and leadership issues.

ÿ For Accreditation reports, do not be consultative or offer recommendations.

ÿ For MAP reports, prioritize suggestions at the end of each section of the report and list immediate and long-term activities that will assist the museum in reaching its goals. ■

In Sight

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Σ Control of the growth and size of the collection. Focused accessioning and de-accessioning was recommended.

As the board considered the seriousness of the collections issues and the costs of addressing these problems, the inevitable question arose about the use of the financial proceeds acquired from deaccessioning. The collections management initiative requires the board to embark on a \$250,000 fund-raising project. With the difficulties created by a 15% cut in funding of the History Center's operating budget by the Commonwealth of Virginia and uncertainties in the national economy, it was understood that this would be a significant undertaking. While deaccessioning and the sale of objects from the collection was a very small component of a much larger collections management plan, it became the focus of board interest and discussion. Many trustees, particularly members of the board's collections committee, were cognizant of the ethical issues involved with deaccessioning activity, but other trustees were not. This was an unusual opportunity for the board to have a direct discussion, not only

about the issue of deaccessioning, but also about the unique public trust for which they are responsible.

Working with the board chair, the director developed an agenda to provide a framework for a rare summer board meeting to address the issue of deaccessioning. With the assistance of AAM, information was provided in advance that would cast a national perspective over the issue. In addition, Elizabeth Merritt, Assistant Director, Museum Assessment Program, was enlisted as a guest speaker for the meeting. What followed was one of the most important discussions in the life of any board. A very well-prepared board listened intently to the museum director's overview of the history of the museum's collections and to the representative of AAM. What began as a discussion about deaccessioning and the use of proceeds acquired from sale of deaccessioned objects became a much larger discussion about clarity of mission and the availability of resources for appropriate care of the museum's vast collections. Certainly, questions about the meaning of "acquisition and direct care of collections" in the context of the use of proceeds from deaccessioning were asked, but the focus of

the discussion was on creating a process that responded effectively to institutional and collections needs and to the ethical standards of the museum profession. The primary concern of the board is to ensure that the museum's policies and procedures reflect the highest standards of collections stewardship. The board had moved beyond a "dysfunctional politeness" in their conversations and demonstrated its deep commitment to the ethical and responsible management of a remarkable community legacy.

These discussions are far from over. Staff have been commissioned to review all existing collections policies, procedures, and practices to ensure that they are consistent with the strategic plan. The board will be provided with a complete review of both a new accessioning process, which reflects a decidedly more restrained approach, and with an overview of how the History Center will carefully initiate a highly selective approach to deaccessioning. A recommendation also will be made as to the use of proceeds acquired from the sale of deaccessioned objects that will reflect the standards of the profession and history museums in particular, the guid-

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What's the Big Idea

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dence that collections needs are considered in the museum's plans for acquisition and allocation of assets.

Are the collections effectively integrated into the work of the museum?

The true value of a museum's collections to society is realized only when they become accessible via mission-driven exhibits, education, research, publications, etc.

Accredited museums are expected to ensure that the museum's public programs and exhibitions effectively use ideas, concepts, and objects to provide opportunities for learning and enjoyment (see *Museum Accreditation: Criteria and Characteristics*). Collections staff must work closely with museum staff responsible for all these functions to ensure that the collections play an appropriate role in meeting this expectation.

Peer reviewers should examine how staff share information about the content and significance of the collections, how decisions are made regarding exhibit topic and content, and how curatorial expertise is captured in interpretation. What efforts are made to ensure collections and the data associated with them are accessible to staff, trustees, volunteers, and audiences? Increasingly this may mean moving beyond traditional methods of interpretation to include electronic and Web-accessible databases. The collections can contribute to all phases of the museum's operations. Peer reviewers should examine how collections are integrated into the message the museum sends via public relations and marketing efforts. Does the museum actively court donors and foundations that may have interest in supporting particular collections?

What organizational characteristics lead to good stewardship?

Certain organizational characteristics support the ability of a museum to operate in the ways described above.

Σ First, all staff and governing authority members should be familiar with the collections, their significance, and understand their relationship to the museum's mission, the museum's stewardship responsibilities, and the basic factors that are key to collections care. Σ Second, it is important that museums involve appropriate staff and members of the governing authority in decisions that affect collections stewardship.

For example, the financial planning process should include input from staff who understand the needs of collections. The governing authority should approve acquisitions that will require new resources such as staff, funds, and expanded facilities, as it is the governing authority's responsibility to ensure these resources are made available. The museum should solicit input from the museum's audiences and community through the use of advisory groups, intellectual forums, or public hearings in order to understand the public's expectations and build collections that work within the museum's mission to serve its needs. Without broad involvement of staff, board, and audience, and mutual understanding of the nature and purposes of the museum there is a danger that decisions made in good faith by individual departments or committees (e.g., house-keeping, finance, public relations, planning) can have unintended negative consequences.

The role of peer review: Assessing the present and looking to the future

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SEIZE THE DATE!

This feature highlights critical deadlines, key dates, and exciting opportunities of interest to peer reviewers and museum professionals in general.

Governance Training for Peer Reviewers
October 23, 2001, Rockford, Ill.
October 25, 2001, Wilmington, Del.
May 2002, Dallas, Tex.
Participants will learn how to assess governance in a museum setting and develop skills for discussing potentially sensitive issues at this AAM/National Center for Nonprofit Boards workshop. *For more information, call Karen Topping at 202/218.7688, or see www.aam-us.org.*

Leadership Through Diversity
October 2, 2001, Tulsa, Okla.
October 10, 2001, Palm Springs, Calif.
October 23, 2001, Rockford, Ill.
An AAM/Smithsonian Center for Education and Museum Studies workshop on developing diversity within an institution. Seminars held in conjunction with three regional meetings. *For more information, call John Suau at 202/218.7676*

Museum Assessment Program/IMLS application deadlines
November 1, 2001 & March 15, 2002

Professional Education Programs Seminars

For more information, see www.aam-us.org/profed.htm.

- Current Issues in Collections Stewardship: Nazi-Era Provenance Research
November 30 – December 1, 2001
Washington, D.C.
- Transforming Leaders: Supervisory Skills and Managing Change
January 4 – 5, 2002, San Antonio, Tex.
- Mutual Concerns of Air and Space Museums
March 2002, Washington, D.C.
- Legal Problems in Museum Administration
March 20 – 22, 2002, Los Angeles, Calif.

What's the Big Idea

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A fair assessment of a museum's stewardship cannot be only a snapshot in time. Peer reviewers should examine the museum's current operations and trends in the operating environment, and extrapolate the likely effects of current actions on future success. How are the audience demographics of the museum changing? If the people who care about the museum's mission, and for whom the collections have significance, are all elderly, who is going to support the organization in 10 or 20 years? If the population of the region is changing, with an influx of new ethnic groups or cultures, how is the museum ensuring that the collections (and the museum's mission) remain relevant to community interests?

Often the attention of a museum's governing authority and staff is monopolized by immediate issues and operational details: how to negotiate the next major collections donation, fix the environmental controls, update the emergency preparedness plan. One of the greatest services that peer reviewers can render in either Accreditation or the Museum Assessment Program is to help the governing authority and staff step back and consider the "big picture," to determine whether the museum is fulfilling its mission and collections stewardship responsibilities in the best way possible, and how it will continue to do so in the future. ■

In Sight

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ance of the trustees, and the unique issues confronted by the History Center.

This process is an enlightening one. Creating an environment that supports an honest and informed discussion on important issues does in the end create a stronger consensus on institutional policy. In spite of our natural desire to control the outcome of these discussions, boards must be encouraged to do this work. ■