



*Finding Alternative Futures:
Sustainability Through Coaching*

Texas Association of Museums



What We Knew When We Started

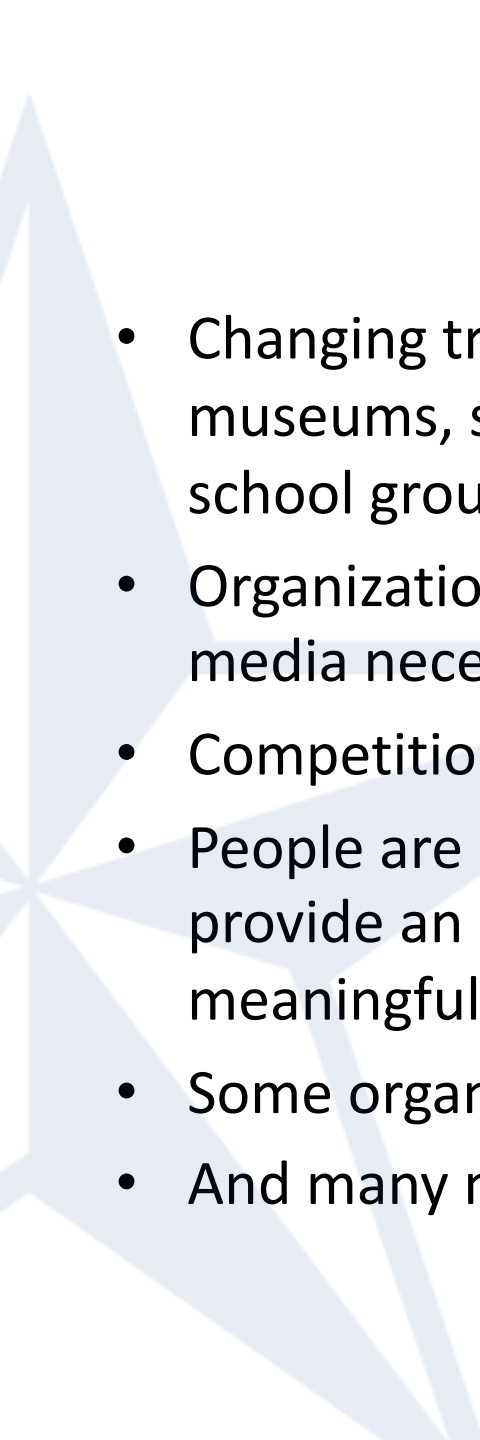
*The Summerlee Commission Report on the
Sustainability of History Organizations in Texas*

The Struggle is Real for Local/Regional History Museums

- There are almost as many history museums (48%) as any other type of museum combined (52%)
- Local/regional history museums often do not have the same advantages as museums of other disciplines.

The Struggle is Real for Museums and Other Kinds of Nonprofit Organizations

- Rural populations are aging and shrinking
- Rising rents and declining availability of space in urban areas
- Donor retention is challenging, especially for small organizations
- Lack of public and private funding
- Shift in foundation funding after 2008 to focus on basic needs
- Demand for services outstrips financial support
- Older patrons who previously established and/or supported local nonprofits are no longer able to provide support
- Lack of strong leadership; 4 out of 5 nonprofits have leadership issues
- Lack of diversity on staff and board; organization does not reflect the community it serves

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- Changing trends in joining groups; membership is down across museums, service clubs, fraternal groups, churches, unions, school groups, etc.
 - Organization has not embraced the technology and social media necessary to be heard in a noisy media landscape
 - Competition for attention and for funding
 - People are not interested in local nonprofits that do not provide an explicit, immediate opportunity to participate in a meaningful way (community engagement)
 - Some organizations are not open to new ideas and leadership
 - And many many many more.....



FAF Starting Point in Houston

The Eleven

Funding & Credit

In 2017, TAM went to the Houston Endowment, asking for support to engage this work in the Houston museum community. The Summerlee Foundation had already committed as a funder with \$40,000. The Houston Endowment saw the potential and granted \$526,000 for a two-year project that became *Finding Alternative Futures*.

Finding Alternative Futures: Sustainability Through Coaching

September 2017 through December 2019

Greater Houston area

Eleven history museums

Three coaches

Five broad content areas:

- Mission and Vision

- Leadership and Governance

- Advocacy

- PR/Marketing/Fundraising

- Community Engagement

The Eleven

- 1940s Air Terminal Museum
- Brazoria Heritage Foundation
- Buffalo Soldiers National Museum
- Czech Center Museum of Houston
- Fort Bend History Association
- Gulf Coast Archives & Museum of GLBT History
- Lone Star Flight Museum
- Rosenberg Railroad Museum
- San Jacinto Museum of History
- Texas City Museum
- West Bay Common School Children's' Museum

What THEY Said About Financial Challenges

WE NEED:

- More Board commitment (\$\$)
- Better donor development
- A broad donor base
- Consistent operational funding
- Financial stability
- More earned revenue (admissions, private events, membership)
- Adequate funds to cover operations/emergencies
- More grant funding from foundations, federal and state
- Help fundraising
- Better grant writing
- More project Grants
- Membership
- Funding, just FUNDING

What THEY Said About Governance and Professionalism

WE NEED:

- Clear business practices
- Board commitment (time and dollars)
- Leadership
- Sustaining volunteers
- Staff support – lack of strong administrative team and not enough people
- Organizational structure – volunteer management, strategic plan, board structure
- Younger board members
- To combat
- Board member fatigue

What THEY Said About Programs and Exhibits

WE NEED:

- New and refreshed exhibits
- A diverse curatorial calendar
- Exhibit rotation
- Organizational structure and a collections process
- Programming
- Modernization
- Fresh appearance (facility) to attract a younger demographic
- Projects to attract visitors nationwide
- Upkeep for physical structures
- Help with functioning as a nonprofit in a government facility
- Assistance with aging infrastructure that limits our growth

What THEY Said About Attendance and Marketing

WE NEED TO:

- Expand brand in Houston market
- Get community involvement
- Increase attendance
- Maintain attendance with increased local competition
- Excite and inspire our customer base
- Find relevance in current environment (as a history museum; in a post-Harvey environment)
- Market beyond the greater Houston area
- Increase awareness

What the COACHES Observed

LEADERSHIP

- Competition for control of the organization
- Board does not respect staff
- “Founders Syndrome”
- No succession plan
- Board aversion to fundraising, pursuit of sponsors/donors
- Board unwilling to personally contribute financially
- Board expectation that grant funding will solve everything and that fundraising is the staff’s responsibility
- Staff dissatisfaction, previous or impending turnover

What the COACHES Observed (cont.) . . .

- Board doesn't understand its role or responsibilities
- Board doesn't see the museum is a business but as their hobby or club
- Need to recruit new board members

MISSION & VISION

- Lack of strategic vision
- Lack of focus or clarity of museum mission
- Unrealistic expectations
- Fragile financial stability linked to having a relevant purpose



What is an *Alternative Future*?

ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

- Reinvention
- Partnership
- Closure

REINVENTION

- The most common way to reinvent a history museum is to refocus its mission outward, on the needs of the community instead of the desires of the museum's leadership. Community-focused corporate partnerships can also benefit both organizations.
- Reinventing the mission to meet community needs
 - [The Bowers Museum \(Santa Ana, California\)](#)
- Partnering with for-profit organizations on initiatives that improve community presence for both groups
 - [The expERIENCE Children's Museum \(Erie, Pennsylvania\)](#)

PARTNERSHIP

Lightening the Load

- Operating costs can be lessened by merging or partnering with other organizations or by finding professionals to serve critical roles on a volunteer basis.
- Merging with other nonprofit organizations
 - The Textile Museum (Washington, D.C.)
- Partnering with other organizations to centralize common operations
 - The Mingei International Museum (San Diego, California)
 - Bath Museums Working Together (Bath, England)
 - The Bellamy Mansion Museum of History and Design Arts, Burgwin-Wright House Museum and Latimer House Museum (Wilmington, North Carolina)

More . . . Lightening the Load

- Working with corporate sponsors who can fill administrative roles *pro bono*
 - The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
 - The American Writers Museum (Chicago, Illinois)
- Selling real estate assets
 - The Textile Museum (Washington, D.C.)
 - The National Academy of Design Museum & School (NYC)
 - The Fredericksburg Area Museum and Cultural Center (Fredericksburg, Virginia)

CLOSURE

- Being acquired by for-profit or nonprofit organizations
 - Washington Heritage Museums (Fredericksburg, Virginia)
 - The Armed Forces History Museum (Largo, Florida)
- Closing
 - The American Textile History Museum (Lowell, Massachusetts)
 - Hostetler's Hudson Museum (Shipshewana, Indiana)
 - The Central Texas Museum of Automotive History (founded 1980, Rosanky, Texas) and Dick's Classic Car Garage (2009, San Marcos)

Where We Began

We anticipated that some participants *would recognize the need for substantive change* in order to define their relevance to their communities and achieve greater sustainability.

Yes, this happened.

We anticipated that some participants would not realize how dire their situations are and that their focus would be on minor modifications rather than widespread organizational change.

Yes, this happened, too.

Where We Ended

- Eleven history organizations participated in the FAF project.
 - 100% experienced organizational growth in positive ways
 - 100% expressed a positive impact of the coaching, the lessons learned, the teamwork and the process
 - Far less than 100% chose to pursue an alternative future

Alternative Future or Not?

To characterize the positions of the participating organizations at the end of the project, we named four categories of progress:

Alternative Future: 2

The organization made a substantive change that resulted in a very different direction.

Adjusted Future: 4

The organization made a significant change to its mission and advanced that mission in new ways.

Potential Adjusted Future: 3

The organization understands the need for significant change but could not make it happen at this moment.

Little Change: 2

The organization will made little change.



Thank you!

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