

Minutes

Oklahoma Historical Society | Meeting of the Membership
Chesapeake Event Center - Oklahoma History Center
800 Nazih Zuhdi Drive, Oklahoma City, OK 73105 and
Zoom Teleconference: Webinar ID: 821 6029 1894 | Passcode: 062172
Wednesday, April 21, 2021, 2:30 p.m.

1. Call to order – President Deena Fisher

The Meeting of the Membership of the Board of Directors of the Oklahoma Historical Society was called to order by President Deena Fisher at 2:48 p.m. on Wednesday, April 21, 2021, at the Oklahoma History Center, 800 Nazih Zuhdi Drive, Oklahoma City Oklahoma.

2. Welcome – President Fisher

3. Announcement of new board members – Donna Sharpe

Donna Sharpe, chair of the Nominating Committee, announced the results of the board election. At-large members are Billie Fogarty and Barbara Thompson, both of Oklahoma City. Jonita Mullins of Muskogee was elected from District 2. Lindsay Robertson of Norman was elected from District 4.

4. Swearing in of new board members

President Deena Fisher swore in new board members Alan Loeffler, Billie Fogarty, and Barbara Thompson.

5. Annual report to the membership – Trait Thompson

Trait Thompson delivered his annual report to the membership. His speech was as follows:

“Members of the Board of Directors and members of the Oklahoma Historical Society,

“It is my pleasure to address you today regarding the state of the Oklahoma Historical Society. Since you selected me to serve as executive director late last year, I have felt nothing but immense pride and honor at being associated with this fine organization. Having been on the job for the past few months, my love of this organization and the people who make it successful has only grown. OHS is blessed to be filled with true public servants, people who live and breathe our mission to collect, preserve, and share Oklahoma’s history. I am grateful to work alongside them every day.

“Before we go much farther, I think it is helpful to dive into the numbers. While they must always be used in context and there are always qualifiers to be considered, the numbers help us get a picture of the direction we are

moving. One of the first things I want to look at is our financial situation. It's no secret that our share of state appropriations has shrunk by over 50 percent in the last twelve years. Within the last three fiscal years, our share of state appropriations has slightly increased from \$12.5 million to \$14 million. At the same time our earned revenue has decreased from \$1.8 million to \$1.4 million. We have remained steady in the number of employees in the organization at around 170 during the same time frame.

“In FY19, our total gift revenue to the OHS (endowments, general gifts, membership dues, and grants) was \$1.1 million. It dropped by about \$26,000 in FY20. Through March 1 of this year, gift revenue is \$901,000. The pandemic has greatly affected giving to nonprofit organizations throughout the country and we are no exception. Three years ago, we finished FY19 with 9,600 OHS members. At the end of the third quarter of FY21, we had 6,800 OHS members. Once again, we attribute the loss of members to the pandemic.

“Total visitation at our museums and sites throughout the state grew from 114,000 in FY19 to 144,000 in FY20. We were on pace to eclipse those numbers in FY21, but the pandemic and the shutdown of our sites for three months put a stunt in our momentum. Through March 2021, we had 49,000 visitors in FY21. At the History Center in Oklahoma City, visitation three years ago was 199,000 people, and to date this fiscal year, we have seen 120,000.

“While our in-person visitation has decreased due to the pandemic, our presence on social media continues to grow. In FY19, we had 51,000 followers on Facebook and we currently have 73,000, an increase of approximately 22,000 followers. We have increased our Twitter followers by over 1,000 since FY19. Our Instagram page, started in 2020, now has over 5,200 followers. Social media helps us to expand our reach beyond those who enter our facilities and allows us exposure to a younger demographic. I'll speak more about our ongoing attempts to bolster our social media presence in a few moments.

“In our Research Division, we have scanned 2.8 million newspaper pages in addition to another 3 million pages scanned by Newspapers.com over the past three fiscal years. We have digitized over 230,000 photographs, both for the Gateway and in special orders.

“In the State Historic Preservation Office, over 9,000 Section 106 projects have been processed over the past three years affecting over 30,000 properties. Eighty-four applications have been reviewed for placement on the National Register of Historic Places, resulting in fifty-seven new listings. 143 historic tax credit applications have been processed between Parts 1, 2, and 3, and seventy-seven amendments have

been reviewed.

“All of these figures point to the fact that the Oklahoma Historical Society has been fervent in continuing to pursue our mission. Under Dr. Blackburn’s leadership, OHS has been masterful at the efficient use of resources resulting in the most gain for the agency. The agency has also been proactive in forming partnerships to accelerate the good work we are doing. I intend to continue on that path as we move forward together.

“I would like to share some general observations with you regarding the state of OHS based on my limited time as executive director. By this time, I have been able to visit most of our OHS sites across the state, I have attended division staff meetings, met with several of our benefactors, and talked with citizens who utilize the services we provide. I am still in the process of learning our agency, but I’m growing more familiar with it every day.

“The COVID pandemic has impacted us a great deal. Our gift revenue is down as well as our visitation. However, our incredible staff members across the organization used the opportunity to pivot to projects that had been waiting in the wings. Whether it was physical improvements to our sites, updates to our website, or taking the time to enhance the education curriculum, our staff members did not rest during the pandemic. Going forward, we will have to find ways to make up for lost revenue and be creative in enticing people to come back to our museums and sites, but I know we are up for the task.

“One of the facts that became glaringly clear over the past few months is that we are understaffed and underfunded. Our mission at OHS is large in scope and it takes an abundance of resources to accomplish it. With little hope of a drastic increase in appropriated funds from the legislature, it is up to us to raise more money and draw more people to our properties. We must be laser-focused on our core mission and resist the temptation to spend our resources on unrelated pursuits.

“Like any organization with a vast property network, we suffer from the constant drag of deferred maintenance. As I learned in my previous position at the Capitol, deferred maintenance problems never get easier to manage or cheaper over time. Quite the opposite, actually. With over \$20 million in deferred maintenance needs stretched across the state, the time to tackle the problem is now. In the next legislative session, I plan to ask for funding to address this problem.

“One of the most high profile and ambitious projects we are working on right now is the creation of the Oklahoma Museum of Popular Culture in Tulsa. Affectionately known as OKPOP, this museum seeks to inspire

and educate visitors as they encounter the stories of musicians, movie stars, theater stars, songwriters, comic book creators, and other influential artists. Construction is currently in progress and we anticipate being able to occupy the building by the end of the year. In the meantime, I am working with the legislature to allocate an additional \$13 million in funding to allow us to complete the project. We are also working with the OKPOP Foundation to initiate a major fundraising effort in support of the project. I have been working closely with Jeff Moore and the OKPOP staff since I started at OHS. Over the past few months, we have focused on creating outcome-based success statements, goals, and initiatives. We have also been working on the lead-up to bringing on an exhibit consultant and purchasing the parking lot directly to the west of the museum to bring in future revenue. As we move toward opening, we will be working to bring on additional staff members and will be focusing on operations and event planning activities. I'm very excited about the potential for OKPOP and believe this museum will be unlike anything we have under the OHS umbrella. However, we still have a lot of work to perform and there will be challenges on the road ahead, but I am confident our team is up to the task.

“Going forward, we will be undertaking a holistic look at the agency to ask the tough questions, examine our processes and procedures, and determine whether the things we are doing are part of our core mission or if we should go another direction. The transition in leadership provides us a good opportunity to examine ourselves from every angle. We need to understand if our resources, both in human and capital, are allocated in the proper manner. We need to look at ways we can be more innovative and creative, not only in how we present history at our sites, but in how we reach people that may never be able to step onto our property. We must also begin cultivating relationships with a diverse array of people to ensure our message and mission becomes a part of the fabric of this state. We are committed to becoming more technologically agile in the future, both for the sake of efficiency and becoming better at sharing our history. Our standard for our future endeavors will be excellence. We will strive to be the standard bearer in this regard and we will continually seek to be better tomorrow than we are today.

“Before I conclude my remarks, I would like to inform you about a few projects I have initiated since I started in January. As part of our effort to reach a new audience for Oklahoma history, we have restarted our podcast, *A Very OK Podcast*. I am grateful to Dr. Blackburn for agreeing to co-host the podcast with me. We released our first episode on women in broadcasting last month. Today, we released our second episode entitled, “What is Spiro?” on the Mississippian mound-building culture. We will be releasing one episode per month going forward.

“With the same goal of continuing to expand our audience, we have launched a project to improve the social media engagement of all the sites in our OHS orbit. Our goal is to create informational and engaging content that expands our reach and entices people to come visit our properties. The team has created a best practices guide and they are now working on creating training workshops to be conducted at our sites. In a post-COVID world, I believe people will be looking for opportunities to get out of the house and we will be ready to entice them to come see us with our social media content.

“At the History Center, we are working to enact a recycling program. This will bring our building into compliance with state law and will make us a better steward of our natural resources. We are also working on a plan to utilize the café space in another manner while also providing a food and drink resource for our guests. Our building tends to blend in with the other structures in the State Capitol complex and we have been looking for a way to differentiate ourselves. Thanks to a generous financial gift, later this year we will be installing high-quality banners on the building to attract people to the museum.

“With the goal of growing our donor base and our yearly contributions, we have initiated a project to draft a fundraising strategy for FY22. We will set goals for fundraising, memberships, and include a methodology for executing the plan. We are also looking at procuring updated software to help us in this endeavor. Look for future updates on this effort in the Development Committee and in future board meetings.

“In the next couple of weeks, we will have a kickoff meeting for our collections assessment project. A recent conversation with Jeff Briley convinced me of the need to look at our collections across the state to determine the areas where we have sufficient items and those areas where we have gaps. With the Bob Blackburn Collections Endowment fundraising effort currently in progress, I believe it is important to understand the current state of our collections, so we know where we will get the most benefit from future purchases. It is my goal for this project to lead into a future effort to install a barcode inventory system for collections, which would allow us to scan an item in the storage area and bring up all of the information about it on a mobile device. This will also allow us to better share information between sites and with other museums across the country.

“Finally, we are working on scheduling a retreat in June for the division directors at Post Oak Lodge in Tulsa. This will offer us the opportunity to get offsite and work together in a relaxed atmosphere. We will focus on strategic planning, creating outcome-based success statements, and goal setting. The retreat will be held at the end of June. We will be applying

for a grant at the Inasmuch Foundation to cover the cost of the retreat.

“The state of the Oklahoma Historical Society is strong. With the continued support and encouragement of the board of directors and our incredibly talented and passionate staff, we will ensure OHS remains strong well into the future.”

Thus concluded, Mr. Thompson’s report to the membership.

6. New business

There was no new business.

7. Adjourn

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned by President Fisher at 3:08 p.m.