



MAP Organizational Assessment

Report American Alliance of Museums

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L. Alan Cruikshank River of Time Museum
Fountain Hills, Arizona

Virtual Site Visit Dates via Zoom:
October 30 – December 2, 2020





The Museum Assessment Program (MAP) is supported by a cooperative agreement between the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the American Alliance of Museums.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

The Museum Assessment Program (MAP) is a national, voluntary program which helps museums strengthen operations, plan for the future and meet standards through self-study and a consultative site visit from an expert peer reviewer. The program offers several assessment types that focus on multiple aspects of museum operations, allowing participants to work on various methods of self-improvement. Since 1981 over 5,000 museums have participated in over 6,500 assessments. MAP is supported through a cooperative agreement between the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), and administered by AAM. For more information, visit www.aam-us.org and www.ims.gov.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report reflects the Peer Reviewer's knowledge and perspective based on what was provided in the museum's MAP Application, its MAP Workbook and what was observed or communicated while on the site visit or through a virtual visit. The report is a snapshot in time—from when the reviewer was there in person or virtually and what they saw and heard. The museum may have already addressed some issues discussed with the Peer Reviewer or made progress on some items listed in the report. The Peer Reviewer conducted this assessment on an individual volunteer basis, not as a representative of their employer, and was selected by AAM in consultation with the museum

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While 2020 has been anything but a normal year, the L. Alan Cruikshank River of Time Museum (ROT Museum) under the leadership of its Board of Directors and Executive Director Cherie Koss determined their MAP organizational assessment should proceed as planned despite the World Health Organization's declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic on Wednesday, March 11, 2020 and the ensuing and now ongoing closure of the museum.

Lise Dubé-Scherr was selected as the MAP Peer Reviewer to conduct the organizational assessment. Subsequently, AAM decided that due to the pandemic, all MAP assessments would be conducted virtually. While this does slightly alter the Peer Reviewer's ability to experience and engage with the museum first-hand, the ROT Museum Board, staff, volunteers, and other stakeholders made themselves readily available for Zoom tours and meetings. Everyone quickly adapted the virtual visit model and as a result, the Peer Reviewer was able to secure an abundance of information, insights, opinions, and ideas from the interviewees. Thank you to everyone who gave generously of their time via Zoom to ensure the success of this assessment.

Regardless of its size or subject, there is often a moment in a museum's life cycle when the Board and/or the Executive Director recognize the need for an independent and holistic operational assessment – a 30,000 foot look at the organization by a museum professional independent of the organization. This MAP Organizational Assessment addresses the objectives defined by the museum and through comprehensive interviews and observations, the recommendations put forth offer the ROT Museum insights needed for it to plan for thoughtful, cohesive, and strategic change and growth in alignment with museum standards and best practices and to successfully move into the next phase of its organization life cycle.

Despite the best of intentions and unwavering commitment of the Board of Directors, the Executive Director, staff, docents, volunteers, and other key stakeholders, the ROT Museum has plateaued in the Adolescent/Growing organization life cycle stage. To that end, the ROT Museum will need to undertake a series of critical discussions to position itself for a successful strategic planning process. These questions center on (re)defining its mission, the lack of substantive increased financial support for the museum since opening in 2003, the perception of the museum within the community, and the status and well-being of its collections. Additional discussions prior to commencing long-range planning center on the museum's brand and identity and a proposed expansion and modernization of the museum and its exhibits. These questions will be challenging to address and will require a willingness on all stakeholders to be honest, transparent, and open to new ideas. A third-party facilitator will ensure all voices are heard and perspectives considered. They will also be able to facilitate the inclusion of external community stakeholders who must be included in these pre-strategic planning discussions and in the subsequent long-range planning process.

This report provides recommendations in alignment with the AAM's core standards and the general organizational components of museums. Recommendations are organized by topic within each section and by priority in the Recommendation section of this report. The goal of this report is to support the ROT Museum in its effort to change and grow organizationally, advance the objectives identified by the museum in its MAP Workbook, and ensure its relevance to current and future generations. By leveraging this MAP organizational assessment in concert with engaging in critical discussions and subsequently undertaking a new strategic plan will usher in a new, operationally sustainable future for the ROT Museum and all who have worked tirelessly for years to advance its mission to the benefit of the community.

Introduction

The Museum Assessment Program (MAP) is a confidential, peer consultation and self-analysis tool that helps museums strengthen operations, plan for the future, and meet and benchmark against standards. MAP is one component of AAM's Continuum of Excellence, which also includes the Pledge of Excellence, Core Documents Verification, Accreditation, StEPs, CAP and other field-wide standards-based programs. Over 5000 museums have participated in MAP since its inception in 1981. MAP is supported through a cooperative agreement between the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the American Alliance of Museums.

For many museums, 2020 has proven to be an extremely challenging year, but for some, also one of opportunity. With the unprecedented closure of museums due to the pandemic, for the ROT Museum this period has provided the Board and staff with the opportunity to focus on several priorities including, but not limited to, the transfer of Board leadership (January 2021), on-boarding several new Board members, updating selected permanent exhibition spaces, and undertaking of this MAP organizational assessment. With the impact of the pandemic on the ROT Museum's operations and reopening date yet-to-be-determined and strategic planning on the horizon, this organizational assessment seeks to provide observations, insights, and recommendations aimed at informing the future growth and refinement of the museum's standards and best practices to the benefit of the Board, staff, volunteers, donors, members, other key stakeholders and ultimately, their community – local residents, second homeowners ("snowbirds"), and tourists alike.

The ROT Museum aspires to engage, entertain, educate, and inspire people about the Lower Verde River Valley through relevant topics and experiences. Using the natural/social sciences of the region it preserves and interprets the past to understand the present and promote future sustainability. (Source: L. Alan Cruikshank River of Time website) Driven by their vision and a commitment to preserve and interpret the rich history and geography of the region for current and future generations, the ROT Museum was founded in 1989 by the Fountain Hills and Lower Verde River Valley Historical Society (subsequently in 2000 becoming the L. Alan Cruikshank River of Time Museum) through the dedication and hard work of a group of Fountain Hills citizens. Today, its recognized as an important part of the community and the regional arts and culture scene, however, the Board and staff have identified the need to further refine and advance the organization and its operations by undertaking this review. As such, the ROT Museum defined three objectives for its MAP Organizational assessment:

Objective I: Analyze the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities at the museum to increase capacity for strategic planning and create a prioritized road map for improving operations and meeting standards for museum best practices.

Objective II: Improve communications between Board, staff and other constituents and create a common language moving forward.

Objective III: Enhance the museums credibility with existing and potential funding sources including donors.

To ensure a thorough assessment of the ROT Museum was conducted utilizing the virtual visit format, more interviews than would normally be possible during a two-day site visit were conducted. Interviews were undertaken with small groups and individuals including, but not limited to, the ROT Museum MAP Assessment team, Board of Directors (welcome and two group meetings), individual Board members including the incoming Board President and high school representative, ROT Museum staff, volunteers and docents, the mayor of Fountain Hills and town officials, Chamber of Commerce and Public Library leadership

and staff, the president of the Arizona Association of Museums, and a ROT Museum consultant. (see Appendix A) The interviews and two site tours were conducted between October 30 – December 2, 2020.

The following report provides observations and recommendations in alignment with AAM standards, best practices, and core documents based on the virtual tours, interviews, and review of the MAP Workbook prepared by the ROT Museum. While the museum is currently closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Peer Reviewer and all the stakeholders largely discussed the museum in a pre-pandemic context, however the closure and impact of the pandemic was not disregarded. When necessary, the current situation was factored into the discussions. However, focusing on the pre-pandemic status of the museum allows this assessment to align with the museum's stated objectives and organizational needs beyond the immediate impact of the closure.

Brief Institutional History

Founded in 1970, Fountain Hills as its name would suggest, is a town in Maricopa County, Arizona known for its impressive fountain offset by McDowell Mountains. (See Appendix A) Prior to the development of Fountain Hills, the area was home to the once nomadic Yavapai people. Today, the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation, one of three Yavapai tribes in Arizona, are a 950-member Native American tribe living in the 40-square mile reservation that was once a small part of their ancestral territory. Fountain Hills with a population of 22,489 as of the 2010 census, also borders the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community and Scottsdale, Arizona. Between the 1990 and 2000 censuses it was the eighth-fastest-growing place among cities and towns in Arizona. The town is currently celebrating the 50th anniversary of its founding.

Recognizing the need to preserve the rich heritage of the Lower Verde River Valley, in 1989 several Fountain Hills residents gathered to form the Fountain Hills and Lower Verde River Valley Historical Society, which in early 2000 became the L. Alan Cruikshank River of Time Museum.

The museum was named after one of the town's first residents and owner of the local newspaper, Alan Cruikshank. Originally located in Fountain Park, the museum moved to its current location in 2003 when a \$3.7m bond issue funded construction of a joint library/museum building on town property, adjacent to the community center. The Town of Fountain Hills continues to provide the property along with building services, a relationship that has sustained the Museum since its opening in 2003. (Source: L. Alan Cruikshank River of Time website.)

The 5,000 square foot museum shares an entrance and lobby area with the library as well as free public parking. The museum is mostly in its original 2003 configuration and includes permanent exhibits, very limited changing exhibition space, a small store, and office space. In addition to the lobby, the museum shares restrooms and a conference room with the library. As visitors move through the exhibition space, they engage with diorama and didactic-type exhibits that have been modestly modified or changed since 2003. Programming has ebbed and flowed over the past 17 years as it has been largely dependent on the staff person who originated the program with the exception of several core programs and events such as docent tours, the Yavapai Tour, dinner and a lecture programs, and the annual Holiday Mart.

Three years ago, the museum successfully hired its first professional Executive Director with extensive museum experience. Prior to Cherie Koss' arrival, the museum had several dedicated directors who sought to advance the museum's mission and operations. However, they were faced with financial and operational challenges, varying opinions on what is in the best interest of the museum, how best to define and implement museum standards and best practices within the scope of their limited budget, and a high staff turnover rate. In the past three years, the Executive Director has leveraged her experience and expertise to listen and learn about the culture of the museum and community, stabilize the organization and operations, assume the leadership role she is charged with, and further the professionalization of the organization all with varying degrees of support and success. Most-notably because of her efforts, visitation has doubled in two years from 1,000 in 2017 to 2,000 visitors in 2019. The museum currently has three part-time employees in addition to the Executive Director who transitioned from part-time to full-time in 2019.

Currently, the ROT Museum is closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Board and Executive Director are focused on the financial and operational well-being of the organization and how to best navigate through this unprecedented time, but as noted above, they are also leveraging this rare opportunity to realize several important initiatives including the transfer of the Board leadership in January 2021 and modifications to the exhibits. A reopening date for the museum is dependent on the status of the pandemic in the region but it will likely reopen to the public in early 2021.

FINAL SUMMARY

Throughout this MAP Organizational Assessment, it was apparent that the River of Time Museum is well-respected in the community and continues to play an important role within the Fountain Hills arts and culture community. Because it was created by residents, for the enrichment of the community and region, its mission is compelling and appreciated by its visitors. People care about the museum.

All the interviewees who participated in this virtual MAP organizational assessment conveyed their commitment to the success of the museum and unwavering desire to see the museum continue to evolve as an organization. Each participant generously shared their thoughts, ideas, and feedback which clearly indicates their level of engagement with the museum. There was very high praise and respect for the museum's Executive Director Cheri Koss and her leadership over the past three years. This assessment, especially because it was conducted remotely, would not have been as successful without each individual's candor. Thank you to everyone for adapting to the virtual format and ensuring this assessment could move forward despite the impact the pandemic. A true team effort.

While this assessment offers a long list of recommendations, what is most salient to the overall discussion and the objectives stated, is the need for the ROT Museum to take the time necessary to redefine, rescope, and realign its vision, mission, and financial and human resources so it can operate as a cohesive, well-honed small museum in service to its community. All the recommendations presented in this report can be addressed and the museum can successfully grow and change to ensure its relevance and sustainability. To do so, however, leadership and internal and external stakeholders alike must commit to working together in a respectful, open, and meaningful manner. Ideas and feedback should be embraced and encouraged. While financial resources are tight, engaging selected consultants and facilitators as well as undertaking additional

assessments are essential. Many questions need to be answered and a new strategic plan needs to be developed with the assistance and guidance of external experts.

As noted, there are critical questions put forward in this report that must be addressed, and honest answers sought regardless of how difficult or unexpected the answers may be. Because the ROT Museum is currently closed due to the pandemic, now is the moment to take the time necessary to address these big questions in a substantive manner. Under the committed leadership of its Board of Directors and their Executive Director and with the support of countless stakeholders within the community, the ROT Museum is ready to undertake the hard work that needs to be done to move the museum along the organizational life cycle continuum. There is little doubt that there is as much commitment, passion, and ambition within the organization today as there was when the founders worked diligently for years to make the L. Alan Cruickshank River of Time Museum a reality.

A heartfelt thank you to Cherie Koss, the museum's enthusiastic and tireless Executive Director for having the foresight and commitment to undertake this MAP Organizational Assessment. It is a comprehensive process which requires heavy-lifting by the Executive Director to rally the internal MAP team, the Board of Directors, staff, volunteers, docents, members, funders, community partners, and other stakeholders in the process. No easy feat. Congratulations to the River of Time Museum community for successfully undertaking a MAP Organizational Assessment and a review of the recommendations presented.