



THE CHESWICK MUSEUM

In December 2000, with great fanfare and fine champagne, the fifty-member board of trustees of the Cheswick Museum adopted a new strategic plan: “New Horizons for a New Millennium.” The document was the product of more than two years of labor by senior management, the board, and outside consultants on planning, marketing, and fund-raising. While the lion’s share of the work was done by a Strategic Planning Task Force comprised of trustees and executive staff, the entire board participated in the design of the process, and in reviews of several drafts.

The key components of the plan were to:

- (a) Construct an addition to the museum in 2003-2006 that would add 25% more space for exhibits, an expanded store, and upgraded food services;
- (b) Launch a six-year \$80,000,000 capital campaign in 2001;
- (c) Deepen the museum’s holdings with selective acquisitions for the core collection of European masters and for works relevant to regional demography (i.e., Latin, Asian, and African); and
- (d) Extend the museum’s reach farther into the metropolitan community by building closer ties with schools, colleges, and retirement communities.

Taken together, these priorities were intended, according to the Plan, to make “Cheswick even more visible nationally and even more valued regionally.” “Since adopting the plan, the board has periodically reviewed progress toward achieving the stated goals and considered whether the plan should be revised. So far, there have been no major changes to the plan.”

Margaret Creighton, the museum’s director since 1995, was enthusiastic about all four strategic initiatives. “Once the plan was approved,” she said, “I rolled up my sleeves and got to work with the board’s help.” The campaign began on schedule. During the silent phase, which was to run from late 2001 until mid-2004, three board members pledged \$5 million each, and 12 more pledged between \$1,000,000 and \$3,000,000 each. Using a combination of internal funds and debt, at a very favorable rate, financing for the addition was obtained, and ground was broken in January 2003. At the same time, a few key acquisitions substantially strengthened Cheswick’s claim as the major repository of regionally significant works of art.

In attempt to extend the museum’s reach in the community, Creighton concentrated first on school children. In July 2000, she convened superintendents from the seven largest districts to discuss how the museum could be a more valuable resource for the school systems. As a follow-up, members of the museum staff met with each district’s curriculum supervisors and a large number of their art and history teachers. Creighton made a number of other small, but important, changes: “children-friendly items” were added to the Garden Spot menu, a Teacher’s Guide to the Cheswick Collections was developed by staff and distributed free throughout the region, and admissions fees were waived to ensure that youngsters from even the most impoverished schools could visit the museum. The outreach program was so successful that attendance by school age children nearly doubled between September 2000 and September 2002. During the school day, the Cheswick was now almost always abuzz and alive with excited, if occasionally noisy, young museum visitors.

Not everyone viewed this initiative as an unqualified success. Some loyal patrons started to register complaints with museum staff as well as friends on the board about the constant “din” from school children, the “swarms of seven-year olds,” and the “perfume” of hot dogs and nachos. When Preston Walker and Julia

Winthrop, both major benefactors and long-time trustees, compared notes, they reached the same conclusion: “Cheswick for Children,” as the initiative was called, was “getting out of hand.”

Walker informally mentioned their concern to Creighton at a museum fund-raiser. “Margaret,” Walker stated, “the Cheswick is beginning to look like a day care center. It’s undermining the atmosphere of the museum and dampening people’s enthusiasm, just at a time when we are turning to these same people to raise money.” After listening attentively, she explained that she was trying to implement a strategic priority approved by the board, but realized that the trade-off for this success might create “an ambiance that from time-to-time is not in keeping with what some of our patrons might like.” She said this concern had come to the attention of the staff. However, she was reluctant to close the museum to all but school children several mornings a week, as another museum had done. “We want to be open to all the people, all the time,” she explained. Walker rejoined, “We want the museum to be enticing to all its supporters all the time.” Creighton indicated that she would share the concerns of Walker and Winthrop with the Head of Community Relations and the curators, and “give the matter further thought.”

Six weeks, on Thursday, October 10, 2002, the “incident” occurred. Several fifth graders, on a class tour, made their way into an alcove where wheelchairs were stored for the disabled and elderly. In short order, a “race” was under way down the central corridor of the museum. In the process, a patron, a friend of Winthrop’s, was struck and slightly bruised as she emerged from the ladies room. For Walker and Winthrop this was the last straw.

Within two days, both trustees telephoned the board chair, Tom Pierce, CEO of the second largest bank in the state, and urged that the board step in. “This is an issue,” Winthrop declared, “that requires the immediate attention of the board. I’d like to see, and frankly Tom, I expect to see, the matter on the agenda for our next meeting.” Walker was even more emphatic. “Tom, this has got to come to an end, and quickly. We’ve lost sight of our adult visitors. No one, including me, is going to support this museum if they can’t enjoy its holdings without confronting the same mobs you’d expect to find at Disneyland. I talked to Margaret once already and, candidly, she has a tin ear on the subject. It’s time for the board to intercede. I’m going to be very disappointed if we do not air this topic at our next board meeting.”

Not wanting to act precipitously or elevate the urgency of the issue, Pierce waited six days for his regularly scheduled bi-weekly, “touch base” phone call with Creighton. Pierce recounted his conversations with Walker and Winthrop. “To be honest, Meg, I’m in a quandary. Is this something we should revisit with the board or with the Executive Committee? I don’t want to overreact, but I don’t want to alienate any trustees either. Is there any harm in discussing the matter with the board? What do you think?”

With a steady voice, but thinly concealed annoyance, Creighton replied, “Tom, I’d hate to see one incident or a few dissidents trigger a discussion of this issue by the board, or even the Executive Committee. The board approved the big-picture strategy: reach out to the community. We’re doing just that. Will there be some glitches? Of course. This isn’t the first time someone was jostled at the museum, and it won’t be the last. Far more importantly, we’re succeeding. We’re getting future patrons in here by the hundreds and the schools and mayors are seeing us as a really valuable community asset. I’m thinking about making a few of the galleries off limits to school tours which means there will always be quiet space for adults, but I’d like to discuss that further with the staff, and I’d prefer that it not appear to be in response to a directive from the board based on the ‘incident.’ My real plea, Tom, is that we not go down the slippery slope of micro-management just because a few—yes, moneyed—trustees have a bone to pick. Putting this item on the agenda will be demeaning to me and demoralizing to the staff. I’m sure you’ll do the right thing, Tom, you always do.”

Pierce thanked Margaret for her input, hung up the phone, and eyed the sprawling Jackson Pollock canvas hanging on his office wall. “I wonder,” he mused, “if Pollock had museum governance in mind when he was painting this one?”