

Timothy J. Chester, Interim Museum Director

As your interim director, I was recruited to return to the Louisiana State Museum in late September of last year to tackle perceived deficiencies in museum operations and to “right the museum boat” – that is, to caulk the leaks, get the museum back in the water, and pointed in the right direction, to keep with the maritime metaphor. The “right direction” was defined as embracing the best practices that exemplify the operation of a nationally accredited museum – a status that LSM was recently re-awarded by the American Alliance of Museums. This status has been hard fought for and somehow maintained since the accreditation program began in the 1970s.

Specifically, I was asked to work towards three primary goals while overseeing daily operations and nudging the institution forward:

1. Assist the board and its search committee by working to help the museum position itself so that it is sufficiently attractive to potential qualified candidates for a settled director.
2. Assist the museum’s staff and leadership in structuring a capital campaign in support of a bold new multimillion-dollar jazz experience to be installed at the Old United States Mint, based on LSM’s New Orleans Jazz Club collections and other nationally significant holdings.
3. Lay the foundation for a public private partnership that would allow the museum’s operating budget to grow appropriately and proportionately with the museum’s size and national prominence; stabilize and contain the museum’s dependence on the state’s general fund appropriations; and create a firewall between the stability of museum operations and capricious nature of state politics.

I was surprised and delighted by what I found once I dug into my work. While there was ample evidence of past practices that were counter-productive at best, abetted by a museum operating budget that had been shrinking yearly, I found a thin, but dedicated and highly competent professional staff, loyal hard working support employees and passionate trustees and supporters who were waiting for

leadership and direction. With some slight exception, I also found that the museum's support organizations were also ready to press forward, with good leadership and with ranks of active and talented volunteers ready and eager to advance the museum's mission.

Working with staff, stakeholders and with sympathetic employees in the State's Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism, several good projects and initiatives have emerged on my watch:

- A commitment to financial management on the level of all the boards, but particularly by the LSM board and its Irby Committee. A new full time Business Manager was hired and is in place.
- A robust staff and volunteer-generated plan was created for the future of Madame John's Legacy, arguably one of the most important "artifacts" in the museum's collection. An amazing NEH planning grant was submitted for funding this work through the Friends of the Cabildo.
- The Louisiana Colonial Documents Project is nearing completion this summer, capping nearly eighty years of dedicated work of cataloging, preserving, conserving, housing, translating, and the indexing and digitizing of these precious resources. This work includes the launch of a dedicated web portal that opens this extraordinary archive for world-wide use. Staff is planning a statewide celebration publicizing the launch for mid-November 2017.
- Capital Repair work on the skin of the Cabildo and the Presbytere was partially completed and given a boost by the state legislature with the appropriation of additional emergency funds to finish the job. Plans and budgets are in development for addressing long overdue capital repair work on the Jackson House, Arsenal, Creole House, Madame John's Legacy the Old U.S. Mint and the Lower Pontalba Building. Repair of the HVAC system at the Presbytere should be near completion by the end of June.
- A major commitment to appropriate preservation of the National Historic Landmark buildings that house the museum in New Orleans and Thibodaux was made through the Board's formation of a standing architectural and preservation oversight standing committee to advise the board on all proposed renovation and preservation projects.

- Re-energizing of the Louisiana Civil Rights Museum Advisory Board was undertaken by its members aided by museum staff along with a commitment to move into the Arsenal with an initial exhibition planned there in time for 2018. The museum committed to housing these programs in the now empty and under-utilized building, working in collaboration with community groups like Tulane university's Amistad Research Center. Collaboration with the Friends of the Cabildo's acquisition program enabled the acquisition by purchase of an extraordinary archival collection gathered by the Rev. T.J. Jemison documenting the civil rights advances in Louisiana beginning in 1949 and ending with the Baton Rouge Bus Boycott of 1953 – the nation's first bus boycott of the burgeoning civil rights movement.
- City of New Orleans Tricentennial celebrations will focus on a revitalization of exhibitions in the Cabildo, including a new family-friendly installation focused on the curators' picks of great institutional historical treasures embodying fabulous stories – one for each of the thirty-five decades that has passed since the founding of New Orleans. The exhibition of the original Louisiana Purchase documents from the National Archives is scheduled for the end of 2018 and early 2019.
- Master planning for the LSM's development of the New Orleans Jazz Experience Project at the Old United States Mint was underwritten by the Museum Board with funds from the Irby Trust that will "size the box," accompanied by a recommended budget and plan of work. The analysis is being prepared by the Solomon Group in association with Gallagher & Associates Exhibition Planning and Design, and Eskew+Dumez+Ripple, Architects, integrating exhibition planning, experience design and architectural preservation planning, and necessary building upgrades. The report will be completed by the end of this month.

Considering these examples of institutional progress, there's a lot to celebrate. But I'm sad to report that this good news is marred and even threatened by a pattern of escalating political interference in daily museum operations emanating from the Lieutenant Governor's Office.

This kind of political disruption isn't new to this institution. In fact, they've been a regular reality of museum administration in Louisiana since the legislature diminished the authority and ability of the museum's board of directors to be effective trustees a decade ago. Former LSM Director David Kahn, one of the nation's top history museum directors, who now leads New York's prestigious Adirondack Museum after his forced resignation in June 2008) recently made the observation, quoted in the New Orleans Advocate on June 7, 2016: "I've been a director at five different institutions, including the Louisiana State Museum, and it's the only place that I've ever worked where there was incredibly and completely unprofessional interference in the day-to-day operation of the museum." This political interference has born the irregular fruit of six museum directors in the space of ten years— an unenviable track record that has tarnishd the museum's reputation nationwide.

When I arrived six months ago, I was assured by the Lieutenant Governor that I would be free to manage the museum without political interference, but that has proven to be increasingly difficult.

Since last fall, the museum staff and board have been struggling with the Lieutenant Governor usurping the authority of the board with his staff writing and implementing staff position descriptions that are out of sync with the museum's brand and marketing and its internal management structure; attempting to commandeer museum-owned apartments in the Pontalba for personal and non-museum use; interfering with the process of application for residential apartments as proscribed by state law; overriding the board's trustee oversight and preservation of the museum's permanent collection of historic and cultural treasures by directing loans to public officials by bypassing internal systems of review; repeatedly threatening to sell the museum's collections research center for departmental gain while publicly suggesting that the collections might be sold on e-Bay for profit; attempting to modify and alter the historical interior of a National Historic Landmark property at public expense for personal convenience; overriding the museum director's supervision of senior museum staff and attempting to intimidate museum staff in an attempt to avoid paying mandated standard rental fees for afterhours use of museum facilities for private events.

The latter incident prompted this outburst from Chief of Staff Julie Samson: “Tim Chester doesn’t own that museum, the Lieutenant Governor does!” - a telling comment that reveals an assumption of privilege concerning museum-owned public property.

These incidents represent a growing threat to the health and prosperity of the Louisiana State Museum.

- They undermine the foundation of public trust and ethics that are core to any museum’s success and to its ongoing national accreditation.
- They erode administrative cohesion and the ability to engage in effective long-range planning
- They attack the authority of museum board as enshrined in state law
- They compromise the museum’s mission of preserving its invaluable collections and its ongoing mission to collect objects that embody the rich history of Louisiana’s citizens
- They imperil the museum’s program of providing public access to the state’s cultural patrimony
- They render nigh impossible the advancement of the Jazz Project through public investment
- They threaten the viability of several grants in the pipeline representing a total effort of nearly \$400,000
- They raise the specter of possible revocation of the museum’s precious national re-accreditation – a precondition for funding from many foundations, corporations and grantees.

This pattern of interference in and disruption of the orderly management of daily museum operations has escalated in recent days and weeks and has grown to a such a point that I’ve come to realize, with great personal and professional regret, that it’s now no longer possible for me to work effectively towards the goals that were set for me when I was recruited as your interim director last summer.

Therefore, it’s with great regret and sorrow that I resign my position of interim director to Louisiana State Museum Board effective the close of business today. It has been an immense privilege to work alongside such extraordinary talent and

dedicated supporters, and with such vitally important and nationally significant museum collections and historic landmarks. It is my hope and prayer that this summary may be useful in pulling the institution into a healthier sphere of stable operation.



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