



Museums for America

Sample Application MA-21-16-0498-16

Project Category: Community Anchors

Funding Level: \$5,000-\$25,000

Buffalo Audubon Society

Amount awarded by IMLS: \$21,578

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Abstract
- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

Please note that the instructions for preparing narratives for FY2017 applications differ from those that guided the preparation of previous applications. Be sure to use the narrative instructions in the FY2017 Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program and project category to which you are applying.

ABSTRACT

Buffalo Audubon will engage community members in the reinvention of the indoor and outdoor visitor experiences at the Beaver Meadow Audubon Center. Three design sessions will identify and confirm the major themes that will be interpreted across the site, develop the design for a hands-on, experiential nature play area and associated 'diffuse' elements throughout the site, and inform hands-on exhibits to be installed inside the nature center building. Community members will be guided by three experts in the design of these elements of a nature center experience. Visitors to the center will evaluate the recommendations that are developed in the three design sessions. The outcomes of this project include specific plans for the interior and exterior exhibits and interpretive spaces and a greater connection with the communities that we serve.

Buffalo Audubon Society IMLS Narrative Community-based reinvention of the Beaver Meadow Audubon Center

1. Statement of Need

We propose to engage Buffalo Audubon Society (BAS) constituents and representatives of our target audience in visioning sessions to develop concrete plans to infuse the landscape and exhibits at the Beaver Meadow Audubon Center (BMAC) with hands-on, inquiry based learning opportunities. Participants will develop robust plans for a Nature Play Area that contains a diverse array of elements, for individual nature play and exploration elements to be distributed throughout the landscape, and for interactive exhibits within the main Nature Center building. These three elements will be connected by major place-base interpretive themes that bring participants closer to the landscape, habitats, and wildlife of Western New York.

Currently, interior and exterior displays and exhibits are static holdovers from previous eras. (see supporting materials document 2 for examples of current conditions) Few if any actually engage visitors in hands-on experiential learning of any type. This problem was identified through our 2012 strategic planning process and a subsequent peer consult undertaken with the Association of Nature Center Administrators (ANCA; the report from this consult is attached as a supporting document). A tangible outcome of this consult was the hiring of a Director of Education who is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the center and its educational programming. Since filling this position we have developed an Education Master Plan which guides all of our education programs and activities. Further work during the development of our current Education Master Plan confirmed and clarified the need for interactive experiential learning spaces both indoors and outdoors.

This project will benefit the children and families of Western New York, school groups who come to Beaver Meadow to learn about the natural world, and visitors from across the country and around the world who visit our location. Representatives of these constituencies have been involved in the development of our Strategic Plan and Education Master Plan. Nature play and experiential learning are well documented as having positive impacts on physical, cognitive and social development of youth. Additional studies have shown that nature play promotes gender equality and conservation-mindedness in adults, among other positive impacts.

The mission of BAS is to promote the appreciation and enjoyment of the natural world through education and stewardship. This is the core of our strategic plan. This project will provide the foundation for the reinvigoration of our Nature Center programming and exhibits and will ultimately address our strategic goals of strengthening our centers and preserves and providing experiences in nature that are educational and inspirational. The past two years have included an assessment of our current offerings, the ANCA peer consult and the development of our Education Master Plan. A key recommendation of this plan (endorsed by staff, volunteers and users) is to develop a site that engages audiences in learning and provides interactive experiences that interpret the natural world. This project flows directly from the strategic plan, the subsequent peer consult and the new Education Master Plan.

Nature Centers typically fall into one of three distinct typologies: A showcase that equals an amazing natural feature or landscape, a gateway to a landscape, or a community center that provides a range of experiences and activities for residents from the surrounding area. Given the location of BMAC in rural Wyoming County, the center has traditionally functioned as primarily a gateway to the habitats present on site and secondarily a community center that provides a wide range of activities that support local families. Nature education forms the core of our work, but we also host blood drives, civic meetings, art shows and many varied activities. In order to create a connection between rural Wyoming County and the urban communities of Buffalo and its surrounding suburbs we need to provide high-quality learning experiences that build and diversify our audience. This project will increase the stature of the Nature Center and its associated property as a destination location and learning laboratory that truly engages children and families with the natural world.

We strongly believe that by giving children and visitors all age experiences that promote their engagement with and exploration of natural world that we will provide them with tools that they can transfer to other areas of learning and that they can use throughout their lives. Along with the benefits of nature play and experiential learning discussed above, abundant literature validates the lifelong impact of first-hand experiences with nature.

In this project not only is the goal to provide exhibits and experiences that place the learner at the center, the learners themselves will identify the elements of these experiences. As detailed below, current users of BMAC will be invited to participate in the design process. These users will be asked to bring friends or neighbors who are not current users of the Center so that we might hear diverse perspectives from representatives of communities that we seek to engage.

BMAC has historically been a community center for Wyoming County. By improving our hands-on experiential learning experiences we will become an anchor for the broader Western New York Community. Engaging people with nature will encourage them to engage in activities and behaviors that benefit the natural world, including civic engagement through community cleanups and citizen science. Bringing visitors from across the region to the center will benefit

2. Impact

The immediate deliverable outputs of this project will be the specific recommendations for indoors and outdoors interactive experiences. These plans will form the basis for subsequent requests for funding from a wide variety of sources. Implementation of these plans is not, however, contingent upon significant external funding - many recommendations or specific elements can be achieved using the internal resources of Buffalo Audubon. Specifically, volunteers are skilled in carpentry and construction and could easily make many of the nature play elements that we envision for this component of the plan.

As the plan is realized we ultimately anticipate that the quality of the visitor experience and the number of visitors will both significantly increase. Visitation to BMAC has been documented for several years, forming a baseline to see whether the Nature Play Area and new exhibits draw a larger audience.

Internal and external constituencies (board members, volunteers, staff; community members who participated in the visioning sessions, and community members who evaluate potential options during Buffalo Audubon festivals) will be surveyed on the following Performance Measures:

- Whether the organization is better prepared to provide a program or service that addresses community needs.
- Whether the organization is better able to engage the community.
- Whether the organization is better prepared to develop and maintain on-going relationships with community partners, and
- Whether the organization is better prepared to share knowledge and other resources as an active contributor to problem solving in the community.

Representatives of partner organizations will be surveyed on these Performance Measures:

- Whether the organization is better prepared to share knowledge and other resources as an active contributor to problem solving in the community.
- Whether the organization is better prepared to share knowledge and other resources as an active contributor to problem solving in the community.

This project will create concrete plans that will allow the transformation of the visitor experience at the Beaver Meadow Audubon center from static exhibits and displays to a dynamic interactive space, both indoors and out, that will promote inquiry and a greater understanding, appreciation and connection with the natural world.

Participants in the planning process will form deeper connections with the Beaver Meadow Audubon Center and the Buffalo Audubon Society. Once the Nature Play Area and exhibits are implemented, visitors who engage in these areas will develop a stronger connection with the natural world. In addition, they will develop greater curiosity about nature and a suite of tools to ask questions about the natural world - or any other phenomena that they perceive. Visitors will develop a greater appreciation for the natural world and will be more likely to behave in ways that protect and steward the environment.

Plans specifying the exact elements desired by community members will be produced as a result of this project - a blueprint for the construction and implementation of a new generation of exhibits and experiences.

The plans themselves will form the basis for funding requests to local and national funders. They will provide blueprints for staff and volunteers skilled in carpentry and other construction methods to produce and install specific elements. The presence of the Nature Play Area and interactive exhibits will further spur the transition of our programming from 'brag and drag' to inquiry-based discovery as well.

Participants in the process will become 'ambassadors' for Beaver Meadow. We envision that the implementation of these plans, especially the Nature Play Area, will become destinations worth a special trip, building our audience and our base for support. They will provide additional teaching opportunities for formal and informal learners, and will support the work of our paid and volunteer educators.

3. Project Design

The core of this project will be three design ‘studios’ where multiple constituencies inform the design of the Nature Play Area, ‘diffuse’ interactive outdoor experiences, and inside exhibits. Prior to holding these studios we will work to ensure that diverse constituencies will be involved so that we can survey individuals with an array of perspectives and needs.

We will reach out to several distinct constituencies to populate these focus groups. Internal constituents will include board members (leadership volunteers), program volunteers and staff. External constituents will be drawn from our day camp and Enchanted Forest (our most popular festival) participants - we have good contact information for these individuals. We will explicitly ask each participant to bring members of a family who they know who have not been to BMAC. We will provide incentives for participation, including food, free memberships, discounts on programs or activities and logo-wear or other items. We will also engage in ‘traditional’ outreach - requests for participation in our publications, on our facebook page, in e-mail blasts and other media.

The first focus groups, facilitated by David Catlin (bio attached), will identify the major thematic areas that will be woven through the subsequent plans. Dave has been instrumental in the design of Nature Centers across the country and is an expert facilitator for exercises of this type. Previous planning exercises have suggested that beavers and their modification of the environment, native plants and pollinators and birds and migration as themes that have both resonance with diverse audiences and a connection with the site, our organization and our priorities. The first session will validate or add to this list and assess community interest in these as overarching topics to be interpreted through the exhibits and experiences designed at the next stage. Facilitated visioning exercises will allow participants to identify topic that will tie together exhibits and experiences across the property. The report from this phase will inform each subsequent planning session.

Session two will focus on outside components - the Nature Play Area and ‘distributed’ experiential elements. This session will be facilitated by Rusty Keeler of EarthPlay Designs (bio attached). There is a huge universe of potential nature play elements that could be featured at Beaver Meadow. Facilitated free-association exercises will identify broad themes to be incorporated into our landscape without being constrained by specific design elements. Rusty will then introduce images and examples from across the country to provide a baseline of examples to consider. This group will be charged with winnowing this rich array of choices and identifying elements that connect with the thematic areas identified in session one and work at BMAC with our regional environmental and climatic conditions. Specifically we hope to identify elements that can be used throughout our four seasons. This session will result in a Master Plan and drawings that identifies the a range of interactive and interpretive elements to be installed outside and throughout our landscape.

The final session will focus on interior exhibit components. This session will be facilitated by Theodore Johnson and Mike Dann from Hadley Exhibits, a Western New York Exhibit design and fabrication firm (firm information and bios attached). This session will produce an initial report or blueprint that outlines the indoors exhibits that complement the outdoor elements,

especially with respect to the thematic areas identified in session one. Wherever possible connections will be promoted between inside exhibits, the Nature Play Area and outside exhibits and experiences located throughout the property.

Session facilitators will be familiar with the BAS Strategic Plan, the ANCA Consult Report, and the Education Master Plan. In addition, a design studio from the State University of New York at Buffalo School of Architecture and Planning has spent a semester researching the facility and will have developed a range of recommendations and designs that will be available to draw upon. These design projects will be completed by January of 2016. A variety of facilitation tools and techniques will be used to allow open-ended suggestions in the early stages of the exercise. As each session nears the end participants will be asked to rank elements that will form the core of the final plan(s).

Once the thematic areas, experiential and exhibit components have been identified we will do a final round of evaluation during large public festivals held at the center. Participants will be invited to view the recommended elements and 'vote' to indicate their preferences using sticky dots - similar to a strategic planning session. Participants will be rewarded with a variety of prizes or take-away items such as window stickers, memberships or passes for other events. These evaluations will be used to develop the final recommendations or the order in which individual elements are installed at the center..

Conversations with other organizations that have developed similar projects have often resulted in a similar refrain: they wish that they had worked with someone to develop a plan, instead of going about it in a piecemeal way. In addition, the community building component is important.- we hope that participants in the planning process will continue to be involved in the development and installation of the final projects. Finally, these individuals can spread the word and act as 'early adopters', bringing the project to a wider community.

Staff at Beaver Meadow, and the Nature Center community in general, still struggle with the integration of technology into programs, exhibits and learning about the natural world. Examples include apps that complement traditional nature guide books (the Audubon birds app, for example), Citizen Science apps (eBird) and the like. E-bird kiosks and other interactive displays are becoming more common, but a philosophical divide still exists regarding how technology relates to discovery of nature.

The focus of Buffalo Audubon is to engage people with nature, prompting questions, and developing frameworks for understanding nature. Our belief is that hands on, lo-tech or no-tech is better, that 'old school' technology is better (binoculars, hand lenses, field guides and the like), and that technology can assist in further exploration once basic tools for inquiry have been learned. Fundamentally we believe that it is important to 'turn off' so that people can 'tune in' to nature. Our initial approach is to encourage visitors get away and unplug. We seek to provide outdoor experiences where individuals are truly engaged with nature, without the mediation of a phone or other device. Within this context, the incorporation of technology makes the most sense in the realm of interior exhibits. However, we will evaluate this assumption within each of the focus groups.

Pre-participation surveys (open ended questions meant to elucidate the nature of the experiences the participant has at Beaver Meadow will be provided to all focus group participants. If the participant has not been to Beaver Meadow (most likely an individual being brought by a current member or event attendee) we will ask about the perceptions of the center and what they would expect to experience when they first visit).

Loren Smith, Executive Director and Lauren Makeyenko, Director of Education, will direct the project. David Catlin, Rusty Keeler and Theodore Johnson/Mike Dann (from Hadley Exhibits) will lead the three focus groups and provide final reports based on community input.

As described above, the identification of workshop participants outside of staff and current volunteers will start soon as the project has been approved, and will continue through the duration of all of the workshops. Workshops focusing on the Nature Play Area, distributed activities and exhibits, and inside exhibits will build in that order. Public input will be sought at festivals and other large events after the workshops have occurred.

Financial support is requested primarily for the engagement of experts in Nature Center activity and exhibit design. Additional IMLS funds will be used for project management and staff time. Buffalo Audubon staff will oversee the project; staff and volunteers will assist with the workshops.

The project timeline includes a sequence of activities that need to occur in an expedient manner. The timeline will be used to track progress toward developing the formal plans for the Nature Play Area, distributed experiences, and interior exhibits.

Results will be shared with the Board and volunteer groups, participants in the planning sessions, and the general public. All of the participants in the planning process will receive copies of the reports. Historical funders and supporters will also be provided with the reports and an executive summary as a prelude to requesting support for the implementation of the recommendations. Media outreach, including articles in our internal publications and press releases to local outlets will also spread the word. Displays and exhibits based on materials in the reports will spread the word to visitors to the center. Buffalo Audubon is also a committed participant with the Association of Nature Center Administrators and the Audubon Network. The results of this project will be made available to these broad audiences.

Engaging community members in the design of interactive and hands-on experiences and exhibits for Beaver Meadow will have a transformative impact on the Nature Center. Beyond the plans themselves, increased community involvement will build a foundation of interest and support for new audiences and users. Engaged learners will develop deep and lasting connections with the natural world, and in turn will become the next generation of stewards of the environment that nurtures us all.

