



Inspire! Grants for Small Museums

Sample Application IGSM-260296-OMS-26
Project Category: Lifelong Learning
Project Type: Large Project (\$25,001-\$75,000)

McCormick Bridgehouse & Chicago River Museum

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$73,881
Amount of cost share:	\$91,784

The McCormick Bridgehouse & Chicago River Museum will develop an art-focused exhibit exploring urban wildlife in the Chicago region, focused on migratory birds, entitled "Birds, the River, and You." The project will have a component on the museum's front plaza to entice passersby to visit the museum, and an inside component with a deeper educational experience. The project will support intergenerational activities pertaining to birds that call the Chicago region home, whether they pass through via migration, or are permanent residents. The primary beneficiaries for "Birds, the River, and You" are museum patrons and Chicago-area students through Friends' Chicago River Schools Network (CRSN) for K-12 classrooms. Over 35,000 museum patrons and workshop attendees are projected to visit the museum throughout the 2027 season. Each year, the CRSN impacts over 20,000 students and teachers throughout the Chicago-Calumet River system.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion
- Performance Measurement Plan

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the most recent Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program to which you are applying.

Project Justification

Which Inspire! objective will your project address?

Our project “Birds, the River, and You” aligns with Goal 1, Champion Lifelong Learning: Support the development of experiential, cross-disciplinary learning experiences in small museums. The associated objective is Objective 1.1: Advance shared knowledge and learning opportunities for all.

How will your project advance your museum’s strategic plan?

Friends of the Chicago River (Friends) has a board-approved strategic plan covering the years 2024-2028. Goal Four of the plan is “Community Engagement: People from across the watershed respect and appreciate the river and are committed to and engaged in its restoration and protection.” The first strategy under this goal is “Improve public perception of the river as a healthy ecosystem that is vital to public health, wellness, and climate resiliency.” The McCormick Bridgehouse & Chicago River Museum (Bridgehouse Museum) will achieve this goal by educating people throughout the watershed on the river’s vastly improved health, how our nation’s wildlife depend upon the river and its surrounding lands, and how we can all take personal responsibility to ensure a healthy environment. While these activities are already part of the Bridgehouse Museum’s standard operations, the museum also aims to establish additional outreach events and programs to grow and expand our audience.

What need, problem, or challenge will your project address, and how was it identified?

Friends was founded in 1979 to protect and restore the Chicago-Calumet River system for all people, water, and wildlife. Our Bridgehouse Museum in a 106-year-old building on the Chicago Riverwalk tells the story for visitors of the river system from degradation to recovery. As the river has become a healthy habitat again, local wildlife that depend on it have grown in turn, which is especially important given Chicago’s location on one of the major bird migratory routes in North America, the Mississippi Flyway. Partnering with a local artist, “Birds, the River, and You” will connect visitors with key bird species that live and pass through the region; highlight Friends projects that have increased bird populations, such as a successful osprey nesting program in partnership with the Forest Preserves of Cook County; and demonstrate bird-friendly actions that people can take to decrease bird collisions during peak migration times.

After a history of pollution and degradation, the Chicago-Calumet River system has undergone a revival in recent decades thanks to the work of Friends and our partners. Accolades such as the 2025 Thiess International River Prize demonstrates how the river now has a rightful place alongside the world’s iconic rivers. However, many people, especially locally, still have an outdated perception of the river as polluted from industrial waste and sewage. Bridgehouse Museum leaders are intentionally designing the proposed exhibit to use wildlife as an entry point in demonstrating how healthy the river has become. Friends has focused on improving water quality and river-adjacent habitat for wildlife since its founding, and it continues to be a key pillar of our work today. In 2021, Friends released a Habitat Connectivity Action Plan with strategies and opportunities to enhance the role of our river system as connected habitat for wildlife, so we have a plethora of content to feature from our own work and from connecting with expert wildlife partners on this plan. Highlighting river-related wildlife provides an opportunity within the museum to demonstrate how much our river system has improved – for example, there were regularly Bald Eagle sightings around the river in 2025 that had not been seen in this area for years – while simultaneously moving visitors to take action for these animals.

Wildlife serves as a strong point of connection for people to learn about and value nature, as Chicago has learned first-hand from popular local wildlife which attract significant attention on local traditional and social media, such as piping plovers nesting along Lake Michigan and a giant snapping turtle in the river. For early learners and those less familiar to wildlife, connections to nature often start with animals people see can regularly such as sparrows or cardinals; others are drawn to discovering species that are less common, have unique features, or are around but well hidden. The Bridgehouse Museum can highlight many of these charismatic local species and use them as a way to enhance the existing museum experience. Due to wildlife being central to Friends’ work and a powerful way to connect and inspire people to care about the Chicago-Calumet River system, this project and new permanent exhibit will make a strong impact on visitors to the Bridgehouse Museum for years to come.

Who is the primary audience for your project and how have they been involved in the planning?

The primary audiences for “Birds, the River, and You” are museum patrons, and Chicago-area students through Friends’ Chicago River Schools Network (CRSN).

Museum patrons have a wide range of knowledge and interest in the river and its wildlife. Many patrons are visiting Chicago from elsewhere and therefore Friends must design exhibits for people who are not deeply aware of the

river's turbulent history and current renaissance. In addition to people who are visiting the Bridgehouse Museum specifically with this destination in mind, the museum also attracts passersby on the bustling Chicago Riverwalk who decide to stop inside, or at least interact with the freely available exhibits on the front plaza. Museum patrons and passersby on the museum's Riverwalk Plaza will engage with and be positively affected by learning about their local wildlife and waterways, the efforts already being made to address issues, and ways they can get involved. With that in mind, we want our exhibits to be able to relate to folks who may not be from Chicago, who can take the lessons learned and relate it to their own lives, water issues, and natural areas. Museum leaders know from talking to both museum patrons and the general public how people have a general understanding that birds migrate, but less of an understanding of migration pathways and how people have a responsibility to ensure these pathways are as safe as possible. Because the proposed exhibit has an outdoor and indoor component, it can reach thousands of visitors who would otherwise walk past the museum, and encourage these potential visitors to learn more. Because museum attendance is pay-what-you-can, financial barriers to entry for the museum do not exist for people who would be compelled to tour the museum after seeing the exhibit outside.

By creating and implementing wildlife lessons and resources through Friends' CRSN program, CRSN teachers and students will be positively affected by connecting with local issues and actions, build next generation leaders. Each year Friends' CRSN impacts a high percentage of low-income students and youth from disinvested communities throughout the Chicago-Calumet River system. Over 230 teachers, who typically instruct 60 students a day, are currently active in the CRSN, representing 139 schools and other educational institutions. Eighty-four percent of schools served by the CRSN are public schools, and 58% of schools served are within the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system. CPS schools have a student population which is 73% low-income, and over 85% of CPS schools qualify for Title I funding.

Identify the number of individuals in the primary audience or in each primary audience, if you identify more than one.

Over 35,000 museum patrons and workshop attendees are projected to visit the museum throughout the 2027 season. Each year the CRSN impacts over 20,000 students and teachers throughout the Chicago-Calumet River system. Over 230 teachers, who typically instruct 60 students a day, are currently active in the CRSN, representing 139 schools and other educational institutions. The CRSN directly engages 2,500 students per year in field trips and presentations.

Who are the ultimate beneficiaries for this project?

The ultimate beneficiaries for "Birds, the River, and You" are largely synonymous with the primary audience. The public will benefit from public education around native wildlife and ecosystem health in the Chicago-Calumet River System. General audiences will gain a deeper appreciation of our nation's native wildlife (including the iconic Bald Eagle) and learn how they can take personal responsibility to improve animal habitat. These lessons would also be applicable to tourists, who could take similar personal responsibility to care for their hometown rivers. Through art-making workshops and the opening of the new exhibit, the project aims to attract new visitors, including more local audiences and more families since the exhibit will incorporate art and kid-friendly activities. In December 2024, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service reported that birding had an economic output of \$279 billion, and that "birding is a significant driver of tourism, retail, and conservation funding with economic contributions at a scale that is almost hard to fathom." The Bridgehouse Museum will capitalize upon birding's popularity and economic impact in order to better serve our mission and bolster revenues.

K-12 students in the Chicago region have proven to be invested in the river and environmental progress via Friends' CRSN program. Students can learn from the curriculum, and then enact local change in their home neighborhoods.

Project Work Plan

What specific activities will you carry out and in what sequence?

Friends will develop "Birds, the River, and You," an art-focused exhibit exploring urban wildlife in the Chicago region, focused on migratory birds. The project will have a component on the museum's front plaza to entice passersby to visit the museum, and an inside component with a deeper educational experience. The project will support intergenerational activities pertaining to birds that call the Chicago region home, whether they pass through via migration, or are permanent residents.

Planning and production of the exhibit will take place starting in September 2026 and last until the spring of 2027. During the museum's offseason (November 2026 through April 2027), staff will hire and work with a local artist Delilah

Salgado to design and create accurate, life-sized birds out of hardboard tempered wood that will be hung inside the museum on each floor. The first floor and top floor will be the focus of the exhibit, with the other three floors tying together a story of migration. During this time, Friends staff will also work with the Forest Preserves of Cook County and the Chicago Ornithological Society to craft content about how birds use our river system in a myriad of ways, recent success stories such as a Friends and Forest Preserves of Cook County partnership to restore osprey populations, and bird-friendly actions people can take like installing window collision tape. Staff will employ a graphic designer to design exhibit panels for this content along with bird identification panels for the birds hanging from the ceiling.

The exhibit will premiere with the opening of the Bridgehouse Museum in mid-May 2027 and will be a permanent exhibit available during all museum hours, 10 a.m. until 5 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays. The museum director and Friends' director of communications will promote the new exhibit on Friends' print and social media. Friends staff, Salgado, and Chicago Ornithological Society will highlight the exhibit at an opening celebration along with two additional workshops in which children and families will be especially invited to decorate cardstock bird silhouettes that can be hung inside the museum. Through this activity, the creative expressions of children will be incorporated into the museum exhibit, adding a personal element to the experience for those making the art and for any museum guest. Children at the workshops will also decorate cardboard-tube binoculars to use to view the birds in the museum and take home as an inspiration to look for birds at home and in their communities. These craft activities will also be available as an addition to the Chicago River is Wild cart (funded by an IMLS grant in 2021-22) that engages families, workers, tourists, and other visitors in downtown Chicago on the front plaza of the Bridgehouse Museum (weather permitting).

Once the exhibit premieres during the 2027 season, Friends will track and measure its use throughout the year. The museum's 2027 season is projected to last from mid-May through the end of October, and full attendance figures will be available in November. Upon the close of the 2027 season, assessment activities will take place, ending in December 2027. Friends will assess the project through attendance data and qualitative metrics.

To supplement this exhibit, Friends will create student lessons that can be used at the museum, in a classroom, or on a field trip to the river or local park. During summer 2027 after the exhibit opens, Friends' education manager, who runs the CRSN, will work with museum staff and project partners to create lessons and resources that pair with the exhibit and highlight related bird content. Friends will recruit a few select teachers from the CRSN network to provide feedback on the lessons before launching them more broadly. The lessons will be made available for free to any school or camp groups visiting the museum, to all educators in the Chicagoland region via Friends' website along with all CRSN materials, as well as being shared directly with CRSN teachers.

What are the risks to the project and how will you mitigate them?

Although no undertaking is completely without risk, the potential risks of this project are negligible. Friends has an agreement in place with the artist and has community connections to make an alternate artistic plan if she leaves the project. On rainy days, the exhibit will not be able to be on display outdoors, but the indoor portion of the exhibit would consistently be accessible as long as the museum is open.

Who will plan, implement, and manage your project?

Josh Coles, museum director, will act as the project manager. Coles will work with the artist, project partners, and other members of Friends' staff. He will also train the three seasonal museum staff on how to facilitate the new exhibit to the public, who will then staff the exhibit on days when it is possible. He has experience with Inspire! Grants for Small Museums funding through his work on the Chicago River is Wild cart project.

Becky Lyons, director of engagement for all of Friends' programs, will provide oversight during the project, work with staff and partners on their respective roles, and provide leadership assistance.

Delilah Salgado is a multidisciplinary artist, curator, and educator based in Chicago's McKinley Park neighborhood. Through her creative interventions, Salgado invites audiences to engage with the resilience of nature and the untold stories embedded in their environments, transforming everyday spaces into platforms for dialogue, empowerment, and collective transformation. She has worked with Friends before on nature art activities at a river-edge park in her neighborhood, presented at the Bridgehouse Museum about a public art piece she created at another river-edge park, and served on Friends' Sanitary and Ship Canal Renaming Committee.

The museum director hires three seasonal museum associates each season, two full-time and one part-time, to support day-to-day museum operations. The associates for the 2027 season will receive training on the new exhibit and will facilitate it as part of their museum staffing, in addition to facilitation by the summer interns. Museum associate staff time will contribute to Friends' match for the project.

What time, financial, personnel, and other resources will you need to carry out the activities?

In addition to the lead staff noted above, other Friends staff will support the project. Mark Hauser, education manager, will help create the curriculum for the project, work with CRSN students, and provide oversight on lesson planning. Tim Touhy, communications director, will promote the project and events through Friends' digital channels. The project will also leverage Friends' organizational support via the development office and business office for grants management, office management, human resources, and bookkeeping. Friends' contracted accountants will process and track expenses and staff costs throughout the project. Friends has organizational experience with Federal grants including IMLS grants. Friends meets annual State of Illinois requirements under their Grant Accountability and Transparency Act, and in 2025 U.S. EPA certified that we meet their standards for administrative and financial policies and procedures.

How will you track your progress toward achieving your intended results?

Staff will track our progress towards the intended results by following the projected timeline as stated in this narrative and the attachments.

To track museum attendance throughout the 2027 season, the museum director keeps daily Bridgehouse Museum attendance records and will compare them monthly to past figures to assess whether the new exhibit and associated promotion brings in higher attendance. Staff will also track how many guests interact with the cart on the plaza.

To understand how the wildlife exhibit resonates with visitors, the museum director will solicit and record qualitative feedback from interns and museum staff based on their conversations conducting exhibit interpretation and talking with visitors. The Bridgehouse Museum offers museum surveys on the first and fifth floors of the museum in order to get general visitor experience data to see what is resonating with visitors and any areas for improvement, and specific questions will be added to the survey to gather feedback on this new exhibit.

The museum director meets with Friends' other program staff regularly during the year to jointly discuss deliverables to ensure that grant-funded projects are on task, and receive advice and input if necessary. The director of engagement will report project progress monthly by communicating with Friends' executive director.

Workshop attendance and levels of engagement will provide quantitative and qualitative feedback about the project and ways people can most resonate with wildlife content and with the exhibit.

For the lessons created around the exhibit, staff will also receive qualitative feedback from teachers during the pilot stage to ensure they work for educators in a variety of settings.

Project Results

What are your project's intended results and how will they address the need, problem, or challenge you have identified?

Friends projects that at least 7,500 people will engage with "Birds, the River, and You" outside the museum and at least 35,000 patrons will be exposed to the indoor portion in 2027. Staff have produced that estimate by using attendance data from prior years and accounting for the vibrancy that the new exhibit will bring to our plaza space.

The urban wildlife exhibit aims to grow the museum's audience and expand accessibility by extending the museum experience outdoors onto its plaza alongside the Chicago Riverwalk. Museum staff have already seen success with this method using the Chicago River is Wild science cart introduced in 2022, because it attracts new visitors into the museum and engages more people who stop by only the cart, still engaging them about the river just from the plaza. By expanding this exhibit to the ADA-accessible plaza, the project also increases the content that is physically accessible as part of the museum, which is key given the limitations of the compact, historic Bridgehouse museum space.

Additionally, the exhibit inside the museum on the first floor will also be ADA accessible, and will contain art, interpretive panels, Friends' osprey habitat work, and an overview of the project, which anyone is able to experience. Artwork and interpretive panels that are placed on the upper floors will be represented on the first floor via photos and QR codes linked to our website, which will exist in perpetuity.

This exhibit is also designed to appeal to all ages, but has a specific focus on engaging children with the art workshops, curriculum, and beautifully crafted visual art experience. This can motivate students to create their own artwork, and understand that the connection between art and wildlife is intrinsically linked. Younger guests can "go birding" inside the museum with crafted binoculars to learn about species they may see in their own neighborhoods, and inspire a life-long appreciate for wildlife and its rightful place within an urban environment. For families who reside outside of Chicago, this exhibit is still quite relevant as bird migration occurs globally, and wildlife connections need to be in place in order for birds to migrate safely.

The project will directly impact 400 teachers and students; since each teacher the Bridgehouse Museum will reach in conjunction with the CRSN will continue teaching 60-90 additional students each year, the project can potentially reach a much larger indirect audience. Teachers desire to learn about environmental topics in schools, but often lack the training or resources to provide them. In the long-term, the project aims to introduce a greater diversity of students to possible career pathways in conservation and inspire the next generation of environmental leaders.

How will the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and/or attitudes of the primary audience change because of your project?

“Birds, the River, and You” aims for all primary audiences to gain increased knowledge of the role of wildlife in urban environments, how to support healthy ecosystems, and will improve their perception of the Chicago-Calumet River system and boost understanding of the importance urban rivers in general. Providing museum goers with beautiful artwork depicting specific bird species that use our river will help them to realize that this river and the adjacent land is alive and full of an array of vibrant species. The Chicago-Calumet River system has a long history of pollution and misuse, which has shaped public perception in a way that is slow to improve. However, over the past 50 years, this waterway is part of a recovery story that is truly inspirational, from an increase of fish species in the river from seven in the 1970s to nearly 80 today, and the first organized swimming event in the river in nearly 100 years being held in September 2025. As a program under Friends’ broader umbrella, we have found that showing increased biodiversity within the river can change perception and get people excited about this natural resource. The City of Chicago would not exist if not for the Chicago-Calumet River system, and the animals that have always used the river system are returning as its quality improves – an inspirational story for museum patrons to learn from.

The project also seeks to provide educators with the skills, resources, and increased confidence to teach about urban wildlife and inspire their students to take local action. Through direct interactions with students at workshops and indirectly through curriculum provided to CRSN teachers, the project aims to make students feel welcomed and empowered to get involved with local environmental issues and to envision possible career pathways within the environmental field. All panels will have information in English and Spanish in order to reach the broadest audience possible.

What products will result from your project, and how will you make them accessible to the primary audience?

“Birds, the River, and You” will result in a completed urban wildlife exhibit focused on bird migration, which the Bridgehouse Museum will share by prominently displaying it on the Chicago Riverwalk and inside the historic 106-year-old building. Curated artwork, interpretative panels, and a facilitated outdoor cart will be available to audiences throughout the museum season from May through October during the grant period and each successive season afterwards.

The museum also has a dedicated website and social media accounts, updated regularly by the museum director, to share the completion of the project. The museum will leverage Friends’ strengths with communications. Friends has its own website and social media accounts on all of the aforementioned platforms, as well as print and email newsletters. Friends employs a full-time director of communications to message projects to the public and send press releases to media contacts. The museum director will report to Friends’ board of directors on the results of the project, and will also share results with the Bridgehouse Museum Committee, comprised of board members and community advocates.

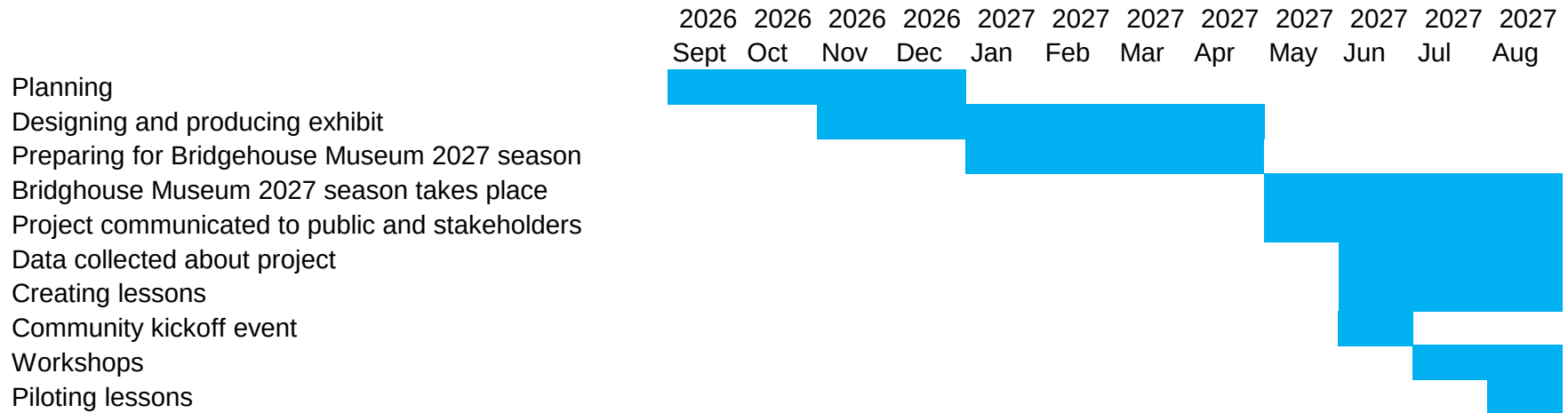
Curriculum related to urban wildlife will be available to teachers and student groups year round. Completed curriculum and resources will be touted on the channels above and shared directly to CRSN educators for their use with students. They will be shared with any teachers coming to the museum for a field trip and utilized as an activity option on CRSN-led field trips. They will also be shared with Friends’ many community partners that do outdoor education activities throughout the year, especially those working with youth and families.

How will you sustain the benefit(s) of your project beyond the conclusion of the period of performance?

The Bridgehouse Museum is committed to the sustainability of this project. The exhibit will be incorporated as part of the museum, with museum associates bringing the cart portion out daily and taking turns facilitating for patrons for years to come. The artwork inside the museum and interpretive panels will become part of our permanent collection until deemed obsolete. The curriculum will become part of CRSN’s suite of teacher resources and field trip activity options. Because the exhibit will reach new audiences and grow visitorship of the Bridgehouse Museum, the museum’s earned income will grow accordingly. This increase will strengthen the museum’s sustainability while also demonstrating to potential funders that the museum is an engaging institution worth supporting. Friends already has experience sustaining the usage and impact of the Chicago River is Wild cart from past IMLS grant support, and is confident that staff can repeat this process.

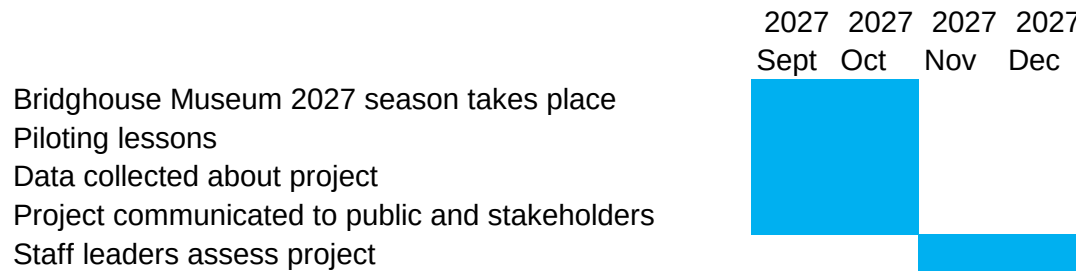
Friends of the Chicago River - McCormick Bridgehouse & Chicago River Museum

Year One Schedule of Completion September 2026 - August 2027)



Friends of the Chicago River - McCormick Bridgehouse & Chicago River Museum

Year Two Schedule of Completion (September 2027 - December 2027)



Applicant Name: Friends of the Chicago River

Project Title: Birds, the River, and You

Performance Measure	Data We Will Collect (e.g., counts, costs, weights, volumes, temperatures, percentages, hours, observations, opinions, feelings)	Source of Our Data (e.g., members of the target group, project staff, stakeholders, internal/external documents, recording devices, databases)	Method We Will Use (e.g., survey, questionnaire, interview, focus group, informal discussion, observation, assessment, document analysis)	Schedule (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annually, beginning/end)
Effectiveness: The extent to which activities contribute to achieving the intended results	Example: At the end of each month, using a report prepared by the registrar, we will compare the cumulative count of rehoused objects against the total number proposed for the project. Example: At the end of each project year, our external consultant will present results of the ongoing observation-based evaluation and compare them against our intended project results.			
	From September 2026 through April 2027, the Museum Director and Director of Engagement will meet monthly to assess project performance and ensure that the exhibit is produced by May 2027. Staff will periodically discuss project performance during the workshops and production process. From May through October 2027, the Museum Director will meet monthly with seasonal museum staff to qualitatively assess the project's success with museum patrons.			
Efficiency: How well resources (e.g., funds, expertise, time) are used and costs are minimized while generating maximum value for the target group	Example: Twice per year, we will assess our expenditures for program supplies on a per-person-served basis. Example: Each quarter, we will calculate the dollar value of volunteer hours contributed to the project as recorded in our online volunteer management system.			
	Each month, Friends' Business Office Manager will provide budget reports to the Museum Director and Director of Engagement, who will discuss if the project is remaining on-budget and which actions, if applicable, to take in response. Friends' Assistant Director of Development and/or Executive Director may also assist with this process as needed.			
	Example: At the beginning, the mid-point, and end of the project, we will administer a satisfaction survey to staff who have participated in the training. Example: We will gather opinions about our online services through questionnaires provided to every 20th user.			

Quality: How well the activities meet the requirements and expectations of the target group	For the primary indoor exhibit, staff will incorporate questions into the existing museum survey to gather quantitative and qualitative patron feedback. While the exhibit is in the museum's front plaza from May through October 2027, Friends' staff will qualitatively analyze feedback from patrons. Staff will also receive qualitative feedback from teachers about the pilot lessons about the exhibit.
Timeliness: The extent to which each task/activity is completed within the proposed timeframe	<i>Example: Every six months, our Project Director will assess the fit between our proposed Schedule of Completion and actual activity completion dates.</i> <i>Example: Each quarter, each project partner will submit to our Project Director a templated report showing their progress on meeting project milestones.</i>
	From October 2026 through April 2027, the Museum Director and Director of Engagement will meet one-on-one monthly to compare progress to the proposed schedule of completion. The Museum Director and Director of Engagement will also meet at the conclusion of the museum's 2027 season for post-project analysis.