

The National Museum of Nuclear Science & History; Statistics, Issues, Successes after Year Number Two of Operation as a Public Interaction Option - 11048

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ABSTRACT

The National Museum of Nuclear Science & History is our nation's Congressionally designated broad, multi-focused education and tourism destination institution for communication of nuclear issues to the public. The museum has been open in its new, larger location for 2 years as of April 2011. This paper describes the state of operations, successes and areas that need additional refinement or attention for best performance at the facility. The discussion includes data regarding visitation, financial issues and corporate support of the museum.

INTRODUCTION

Museum Overview and Current Status



The role of a national museum institution is markedly different from that of a local or statewide museum. Historically speaking, it has taken almost 15 years and considerable strategic effort to pull this museum up to a level of professional practice and institutional prominence befitting the designation by Congress. Indeed, museums, including this one, are works-in-progress, always adding or changing offerings in an attempt to remain relevant and fresh for visitors, members and donors. Seeking opportunity to be seen by a

national audience presents tremendous challenges and requires partnership with a broad array of organizations.

Supporting legislation and public statute that are specific to this museum are Public Law 102-190 Section 3137, (42 U.S.C. Section 7142) enacted December 5, 1991, Public Law 108-7. The U.S. Department of Energy has the requirement of fulfilling this congressional action. Thus, this Museum is the one designated for our nation on this topic and remains DOE's only "corporate" museum although DOE has no real bearing on day to day operations of the institution. The National Museum of Nuclear Science & History is the only Museum of its genre that has a global mission. With a charter that includes collection and preservation of important historical and scientific materials, photographs, archives and objects that cover all areas of nuclear science, both commercial, research and military application, the museum truly reaches all topics in the nuclear context. The National museum of Nuclear Science & History will celebrate 20 years under its congressional designation in 2011. The Museum became a Smithsonian Affiliated institution in 2002.

The National Museum began in 1969 with a mostly weapon focused mission and grew to become a large, privately operated community oriented institution of high interest. The new facility was opened in April 2009, 40 years after the founding of the museum.

CURRENT GOVERNANCE AND OPERATIONS MODEL

The Museum is now operated as a non-profit corporation much as many museums are. This does not negate the federal designation but was initiated as a way to streamline and reduce costs of the museum operation to the government. In 1992, as the museum became a national institution; a Foundation was chartered to help develop the capacity of the Museum. The foundation had fewer constraints in providing funding for advertising, seeking grants, hiring staff than governmental organizations do. Because it is a non-profit, it has a membership elected Board of Trustees. These people serve as volunteers and are both local to New Mexico and nationally recognized professional in the fields but who reside in other states. The Board sets policy, determines fiscal issues and is engaged in raising financial support for the programs and exhibits through individual and corporate networks. The Museum employs 16 full-time, 5 part-time professional museum staff members. These are employees of the non-profit corporation. There are also 135 volunteers that serve the Museum mission with their unique mix of time and talent.

It is a fact that the public is hungry for un-biased information about energy issues. The information in the Museum is of high relevance to the public but visitor survey of on-site tourism shows a higher interest in historical exhibits and aircraft display over science exhibition content. Recent interest in global climate change, world security & conflict, information about arms reduction treaties, new nuclear generation development are providing a strong reason to learn more about these incredibly complex, often interwoven problems. Capitalizing on this need means offering new forms of conversation, learning and allowing dialogue among divergent groups. The Museum benefits as the site for this discussion.

The National Museum of Nuclear Science & History is not an “insiders’ experience”. To enjoy and benefit from a visit takes neither deep technical knowledge nor real science background. The exhibitions and presentation methods employed within are chosen to appeal to a very wide interest level. The Museum is also a “family museum” welcoming young learners and parents into programs and events that target STEM learning and inquiry based exploration. The Museum features exhibits on history, cars, weapons, medicine, radiation science, cultural impacts, science pioneers, physics, global energy issues, waste remediation, uranium mining and nuclear power generation, there is practically something for everyone. A list of exhibits in the new Museum include, Energy Encounter, Pioneers of the Atom, Radiation 101, Trinity and its Legacy, The cold War, Uranium Cycle, Little Albert’s Laboratory, The Half-life Lounge and Atomic Culture.

VISITATION STATISTICS

Visitation has increased about double over that in the temporary and earlier Air Base sites. Strong attention to the destination market and appeal to leisure tourism due to the unique exhibitions has accounted for this growth. Aggressive media and outdoor billboard placement keeps the audience established. Unlike other institutions, NMNS&H relies heavily on non-resident, destination tourism marketplace visitors. So, increasing resident appeal as well as traveler interest improves attendance numbers. Current statistics indicate that 70% of museum visitors are not from New Mexico, 22% are not from US.

Table 1, Visitation values at Museum site

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2009	1285	2706	closed	5187	4174	4279	4909	3804	2479	4242	2658	3063
2010	3342	3144	3909	3488	3976	4733	5579	3621	3255	4512		
Change	+2057	+438		-1699	-198	+454	+670	-183	+776	+270		

The museum solicits comments in formal and informal survey form from visitors while they are in the building. Formal surveys are conducted by volunteers in the lobby after a visit but before departure, a self-survey is also available and monitored for comments. Over all, visitors are very pleased with the scope and scale of the museum and new exhibits. Standard complaints include not enough seating, exhibits too loud or not loud enough. Our tremendous volunteer docent corps. gets rave reviews and their interaction personalizes visit and we get many comments about this.

The museum conducts regular visitor survey that asks various questions regarding the facility and satisfaction with visit. Below represents a random sample of preference and satisfaction levels taken during October 2010 (Balloon Fiesta high attendance period). Based on scale of 1-5, 5 being excellent.

Table 2, Values of visitor exhibition topic preference

	Importance to Visitor	Satisfaction with offering
Science Exhibits	3.4	3.9
History Exhibits	4.4	4.4
Outside Exhibits	4.0	3.9

MUSEUM EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM SERVICES

All educational program use at the Museum site has increased. Museum education offerings are closely aligned with national and State of New Mexico curricula standards. In addition, the Museum has an on-going effort to increase STEM programming as well as specific programming targeted at keeping girls interested in science topics. Summer Camp use is up 15%, school student use up 22%. Total earned revenue is 20% of total revenue from educational services. A new Adult Lecture Series, known as The Robert L. Long Distinguished Lecture Series has taken off and public events are more successful. The Museum recently qualified for a "Making Stuff" materials research program grant from NSF, PBS and NOVA to bring the world on nano-science to our audience. We are one of 16 qualifying institutions nationally. Adding the annual observance of National Nuclear Science Week, each 4th week of January has boosted student use incredibly as well as increased funding options and partnership arrangements.

The only declining educational service is our Outreach Van-based service. This may be attributed to lower available school funding since many states are being squeezed financially and "extras" are not affordable. Increased school Distance-Learning capacity may also be a factor.

A "non-regular" way that the museum is experienced is through people that come to an un-connected (to us) function when the facility is rented. We hear of lots of great comments from people that attended a meeting, dinner or reception. This business area for the museum is up 60%. An additional recent opportunity has presented itself through use of the museum for Movie & TV shooting location. The Museum has been a location for "Breaking Bad" and recently for a motion picture based on a Judy Blume novel "Tiger Eyes".

OTHER AREAS OF GROWTH

Our visibility has led to increased artifact & collection materials donation and acquisition. We are receiving many more items than previously. Our collection now is surpassing 30,000 objects and we have 90% of these catalogued for further study and data access.

Membership has increased in the first full year of operations as well as our membership categories. Growth has come from direct in-museum promotion, web promotion, social networking and through several very interesting partnerships, and has grown by over 400% since 2008 as we began preparation to move to the new museum. The museum presents the national award of Nuclear Science at the annual Einstein Society Gal event

each March. This year on March 19, the 14th of these awards will be presented to Dr. Helmut Engelbrecht, CEO of URENCO Limited.

Obviously the budget for the new museum has increased as the income has increased, and expenses have grown in the areas of personnel, utilities, maintenance, insurance and supplies. Revenue comes in three major categories, earned, contributed, contract. Current full budget is \$1.4M. Further statistics regarding operational budgets will be presented.

Table 3, revenue sources

Revenue by source	2009	2010
Earned	\$736,000	\$789,000
Contributed	\$122,000	\$185,000
Contract	\$550,000	\$525,000
Total	\$1,418,000	\$1,499,000

Although our operations in our new facility are stabilized and have increased in earning capacity, our costs to provide services have grown as well. Operation of a 30,000 square foot “museum standards” facility is not cheap. The museum needs to increase the number and level of members, we need to receive more contributed corporate sponsorship support of our educational and exhibition programs and we need to experience the slowly returning tourism revenue of the past to continue success.

VALUING AN EXPERIENCE

Museums must endeavor to “make meaning” for the citizens that visit them. So the issue of content and bias is very carefully considered in all presentation. Museums are also supposed to be places for discourse and discussion; it is part of the ethos of public interaction. Philosophically speaking, the Museum as a Smithsonian affiliated must work hard and guard carefully the centrist, accurate depiction of historical events and scientific information. As a “general” museum, it is critical that the material found in the exhibits or presented in programs be presented at a level of common educational attainment. This for American museums is the 9th grade. Ensuring this keeps a decidedly technical subject from being over the heads of most of the general audience. It does often cause comment from science, technology or historically trained visitors that would like to see a more detailed study of subjects. Using the Museum to reach a general audience supplies customers as well as outreach options for making more citizens aware of the incredible contribution of nuclear energy and of those individuals that worked in the fields.

The National Museum of Nuclear Science & History is everyone’s museum. Making it a prominent national fixture while maintaining a community interest by those that are near it, an intimacy, if you will is the challenge before us. In our next few years the museum Board of Trustees may endeavor to expand the facility making additions to include a theater, engineering laboratory, additional public exhibitions, and space for display of more aircraft. This will require even stronger relationships and public interest in the museum as an institution.