

DISCOVERY MUSEUM

science. nature. play.

STRATEGIC PLAN 2025–2027



OCTOBER 2024

Museum Questions
Change starts with asking good questions

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The Planning Context

Discovery Museum is a remarkable organization. It is a recognized innovator in outdoor play and nature-based learning, and much loved for its 42-year history of fostering family fun and the joy of learning together, nurturing natural curiosity and creativity, and being a fully inclusive place where all kids and families are welcome.

The Discovery Museum was founded in 1982 by a local teacher and naturalist, Don Verger. Don opened the museum in a three-story Victorian house, the Children's Discovery Museum, with the 1987 addition of a second, Science Discovery Museum building. From the beginning, the museum was committed to the low-tech, hands-on, content-rich experiences for which it is still known and recognized. The museum was also an early adopter of a STEM focus and a commitment to using play as a vehicle to build STEM confidence and problem solving abilities, goals which have become more universally adopted in children's museums everywhere.

In 2009, when Neil Gordon stepped into the position of CEO, the museum began a period of growth, repair, restoration, and stability. Under Neil's tenure, the museum grew its space, programming, visitorship, and commitment to sustainability and Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI). Discovery Woods, an inclusive nature playscape with, as its centerpiece, a 550-square-foot, physically accessible treehouse, opened in 2016. In 2018, Discovery Museum opened a new 16,000 square foot, fully accessible building housing its exhibits and programs. In 2021 the museum created a plan for environmental sustainability, followed quickly by the installation of solar panels which fully power the museum and support solar energy distribution to community partners. The museum launched a DEAI framework in 2022. In 2024, its impact on children, families, and its communities was recognized with the nation's highest honor for museums, the Institute of Museum and Library Services National Medal for Museum Service.

The visitor experience at Discovery Museum is radically different in 2024 than in 2009, when this era of growth began. Visitors today park in a lot shaded by solar panels. They enter a fully-accessible building filled with exhibits, some of which are brand new, and some of which parents remember enjoying when they were children. The museum's inclusive approach to programming and pricing has earned a loyal following from ability-diverse families and those who benefit from low- or no-cost visitation. Weekend, school vacation, and summertime visitors might find it very crowded; the museum has had nearly 6 million visitors since it opened, and now serves about 200,000 visitors each year. The 31-year-old Traveling Science Workshops school outreach program now reaches 2,800 classrooms and more than 60,000 schoolchildren a year. And the 2020 Covid pandemic barely slowed down this rapid growth. After just a few months of closure, the museum began a progressive rebuilding followed by its largest year of onsite and outreach service ever in 2023.

This era of rapid growth has been good for Discovery Museum and its expansive service region. The museum has served more children, families, and schools than ever before, and is a treasured asset to the community. In our stakeholder interviews and focus groups, we repeatedly heard how much the community values the museum; when asked what the museum could improve, we often heard answers like, “We love it the way it is now,” and, “Stay open and continue to do great work.” One community member told us that the museum, “provides a place that you can be confident that you will be welcome and your uniqueness will be not just accommodated but also VALUED.”

The smooth transition of leadership is a testament to the museum’s stability: In January 2024, after 14 years under the leadership of Neil Gordon, Marie Beam, a 10-year veteran at the museum, was elevated to the role of Chief Executive Officer. A natural and thoughtful transition in Board leadership to new President, Xuan Kong, has been similarly fluid. This time of change has brought an energy and space for fresh perspectives and innovative ideas, grounded in commitment to the essential qualities that both staff and audience cherish about Discovery Museum.

The 2013-2018 Strategic Plan is known, internally, as the “bigger is better” plan: it included a vision for a reimaged campus that included Discovery Woods and the new museum building and an ability to better meet the demands of a growing audience. The 2019-2023 Strategic Plan is the “better is better” plan. This plan included the development of an “ambitious, achievable business plan” that grew earned and contributed revenue, and attendance. It inspired an institution-wide commitment to advocacy on matters of importance to children, families, and the environment, and better collection and presentation of organizational performance data. It also made possible improvements in staff compensation, and the creation of the DEAI and Sustainability plans as underpinnings of all aspects of internal and external work. While all of the quantitative measures of success for the plan were met in 2023, the museum paused in 2024 to complete earlier strategic initiatives already underway, allow for the change in leadership, and thoughtfully consider its next steps.

This new plan is the result of extraordinarily thoughtful conversations around where the museum is, where it might be in another decade, and what it needs right now. These conversations included not only the voices of leadership staff and Board members, but a wide range of stakeholders including staff members at all levels, community members, donors, accessibility advocates, school teachers, and more. We found that community members love the Discovery Museum and want them to “keep doing what they are doing.” Those on the inside of the museum—staff and Board—have ambitious ideas about growth, but also articulated a critical need to better understand current impact, find ways to adjust workload, upgrade and maintain physical resources, and rethink inclusive support for this work in order to create a space in which new ideas can be strategically chosen and implemented well.

With this in mind, this strategic plan can be seen as the “stronger is better” plan. It envisions a near future in which a connected, high-performing, and diverse team operating in a well-cared for, supportive environment, has a deep understanding of the museum’s impact and is able to focus efforts accordingly. It increases energy for off-campus and outreach work, and acknowledges the demands on

the physical campus of a decade-and-a-half of growth in visitation. And it emphasizes a reconsideration of what children and families need most from Discovery Museum now. This assertive strategic plan will strengthen the Museum at its core, with new leadership and a renewed sense of purpose, and position it for its next strategic plan in 2028 that will guide the Museum's work through to its 50th anniversary in 2032.

Strategic Plan 2025-2027

Mission, Vision, Values

MISSION

Sparking joyful discovery through play to instill STEM confidence, deepen relationships with the natural world, and empower children and their caregivers.

VISION

Each child will feel eager and excited to explore their world and be ready to powerfully embrace the challenges and opportunities of the future.

VALUES

COMMUNITY: We believe that community is defined by mutually beneficial connection, and is built and maintained through integrity, transparency, intentionality, and authenticity.

Discovery Museum is part of a rich and vibrant ecosystem of people and partners with common goals for the well-being of children and families. We are accountable to those shared community goals and take our responsibility to this work seriously.

CAREGIVERS: We believe that healthy happy caregivers raise healthy happy children, and that we are uniquely positioned to serve and support the adults in our community as we do their children.

Better centering the mental health and well-being of parents and caregivers at a time when the need is acute nationally reinforces our core commitment to the strength and success of families.

ACCESS: We believe that everyone should have equal access to engage in play, regardless of their background and abilities.

Presenting fun, enriching experiences in ways that override inequity benefits everyone and supports our founding belief that play is an essential right of childhood and the best tool for learning.

ENDURING SKILLS: We believe in the power of creativity, curiosity, confidence, and adaptability, and work to foster these essential skills in our own team and those we serve.

Our grounding in Science, Nature, and Play is the context through which we nurture children's natural and enduring habits of mind—pathways to lifetime learning both within and outside our key content areas.

STEWARDSHIP: We believe in the importance of empowering children to be good citizens and stewards of the natural world and their communities.

Today's children face a responsibility to conceive and advance ideas that repair systemic environmental and social injustices; Discovery Museum believes children can and will solve important problems and improve our world.

Strategic Plan 2025-2027
Strategic Themes and Goals

Theme #1: DEEPEN, UNDERSTAND, AND COMMUNICATE MEANINGFUL IMPACT

After a period of great growth, we need to ensure we are making a real difference for those we serve.

- Define impact that we can effectively deliver by finding work that falls at the intersection of our expertise and identified needs; identify and prioritize areas of impact that align with existing resources and drive revenue
- Enhance the highest-impact parts of our work and step away from less impactful work
- Create a comprehensive communication and marketing strategy that broadcasts our strategy, impact, and strength
- Generate an ongoing and iterative plan to better evaluate, reflect, and deepen impact

The Outcome: We understand our impact more deeply and communicate it more effectively; we focus our efforts and talents where we are best positioned to serve meaningfully and sustainably.

Theme #2: EXPAND OUTREACH

Reaching more children and families means looking outward, to our high-impact work with schools and rich partnerships with community experts.

- Focus community outreach on mutually beneficial partnerships that meet our definition of impact
- Leverage community and school outreach in service to the Museum’s diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion objectives
- Research and assess outreach modes to bring Museum experiences into communities to broaden access and drive revenue
- Experiment with approaches to increasing the number of students reached through Traveling Science Workshops

The Outcome: Coordinated, focused outreach efforts that extend our service, generate revenue for the future, and acknowledge the barriers that keep children from Discovery Museum experiences.

Theme #3: INVEST IN OUR TEAM

Our Discovery Museum team is our greatest asset, and in order to take on ambitious goals, we must invest in an equitable, fair, satisfying, and inspiring working environment—and bring our organizational values to the forefront for our staff and volunteers as we do for all we serve.

- Define and implement an equitable compensation and benefits strategy
- Nourish, celebrate, and enhance all the diversity of our workforce
- Build a culture of organizational and individual continuous and collaborative learning
- Invest in the tools staff need to be efficient, productive, collaborative, and connected
- Invest in the innovation and creativity of our team

The Outcome: A connected, high-performing, and diverse team, empowered by a unified vision for the future and ready to make it happen.

Theme #4: PRESERVE AND IMPROVE OUR CAMPUS

Great investment in the development of our Acton, Massachusetts, campus has supported the last ten years of Discovery Museum growth; now, we must consider how best to preserve that investment and address remaining needs in our physical plant, while maintaining our commitment to development that supports environmental sustainability and models our values.

- Plan and prepare to create an Administration Building that is accessible, functional, and scaled to the needs of our staff
- Revitalize Discovery Woods as a beautiful, whimsical, and accessible space for outdoor education, play, and immersion in nature
- Develop an exhibit repair, rebuilding, and replacement plan
- Experiment with ways to leverage the Museum campus more fully in support of our impact goals and for revenue generation

The Outcome: A sustainable, stable capital infrastructure that supports and enhances our work, and a plan to steward and maintain it.