



Annual Report 2024-2025

FOR THE FISCAL YEAR ENDING JUNE 30, 2025



PEGGY NOTEBAERT

NATURE MUSEUM

OF THE CHICAGO ACADEMY OF SCIENCES



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A Message from the President and Chief Executive Officer

The vibrant community that surrounds us is the heartbeat of the Nature Museum. You are at the core of what we do, whether you are attending one of our educational programs, a community event, or lending a hand with our conservation work, we exist because of you, for you, and for nature. Every day we strive to make the Museum a welcoming place of learning and community for everyone. In Fiscal Year 2025, the Nature Museum welcomed nearly 120,000 visitors and reached over 38,000 students through our incredible education programs.

Every day, we use, apply, and celebrate science and nature here at the Nature Museum. Now, more than ever, it is critical to provide science-based data, facts, and STEM education programs so that everyone can understand how our actions affect nature and the environment on which we all depend. Our educational programs provide teachers and students throughout the Chicagoland area with the tools needed to interpret and understand science. It is our goal that all students enjoy a Nature Museum educational experience with a newfound appreciation for and connection to science.

I am grateful and honored to work alongside a dedicated Board of Trustees, led by Board Chair Bob Frentzel. Our Trustees are outstanding ambassadors and champions of nature, science and education in Chicago. Together with our partners we are taking the Nature Museum to new heights.

Thanks to donors and partners like you, the Nature Museum is experiencing incredible momentum as we look to the future. Our conservation biologist released nearly 300 smoothgreen snakes this fiscal year. These efforts are protecting our ecosystems and our most vulnerable local species. Our community scientists completed over 2,000 surveys, dramatically increasing the volume of scientific data we capture and disseminate. Our community science surveys, like the Illinois Butterfly Monitoring Network (IBMN) survey, serve as national models. This fiscal year, findings from our research were featured in national and international news outlets significantly increasing the impact of our work.

We also recently launched our beautiful, self-curated exhibit, *By a Thread: Nature's Resilience*. This exhibit dives into the science of biodiversity and what it takes to protect it—showcasing the research, conservation, and education work happening every day across the Museum and Academy. From exploring regional collections to getting hands-on with real fieldwork-inspired activities to creating their own unique butterfly to add to an immersive ecosystem, guests of all ages will uncover the challenges of biodiversity loss and discover how they can be part of the solution. This exhibit is the result of incredible dedication and collaboration across every department at the Nature Museum, and I could not be prouder of the team of dedicated staff I work with. Please come experience this incredible exhibit!

Thank you for helping us further our mission to connect people to nature and science. It is a privilege to welcome our guests and curious students into the wonders of nature. We look forward to another year of inspiring nature champions, and I can't wait to see you in the Museum soon!



Erin Amico
President & CEO

Mission & Vision

The mission of the Nature Museum is to create a positive relationship between people and nature to grow our region's connection to the world of nature and science.

We envision a future where all people value and champion the science and wonder of nature.



Reaccreditation Process

In March 2025, the Nature Museum received reaccreditation status from the American Alliance of Museums (AAM).

AAM is the only organization representing the entire museum field, from art and history museums to science centers and zoos. As the Museum field's mark of distinction since 1971, accreditation offers high profile, peer-based validation of a museum's operations and impacts. This status increases a museum's credibility and value to funders, policy makers, insurers, community, and peers. This process, centered on self-study and peer review, takes 8-16 months to complete, and is done every 10 years. The Nature Museum was last reaccredited in 2014.

The Nature Museum underwent this process throughout 2024-2025, culminating with a two-day site visit that took place in November 2024. The Museum successfully received reaccreditation status after this site visit was complete and the peer reviewers submitted their reviews.

Highlights from the report received upon notification of receiving reaccreditation include:

- Museum met all the core standards
- Museum benefits from knowledgeable and experienced staff
- Museum excels in many areas: educational programs, leadership in field biology and conservation, collections care, and management

One of the biggest benefits from this entire process, apart from receiving reaccreditation, is the final report's inclusion of areas the Museum can improve upon over the next 10 years in between reaccreditation cycles. Part of the 8-16 months long process is a self-study where the Museum addresses the areas of improvement from the last time the process was completed. The concerns are leveled as either a minor or major concern in the site visit reports that institutions receive. We are proud to only have received a few minor areas of opportunity in our report and look forward to working strategically as an organization to address these concerns and make our Museum even stronger.



Chicago Conservation Corps (C3)

The Chicago Conservation Corps (C3) collaborates with partners across the city to inspire and fund lasting change through grassroots community organization and climate organization. C3 acts as a force multiplier for communities and individuals who want to make a difference. By training community members to launch their own sustainability projects, we ensure that our projects have the grassroots support they need to be successful.

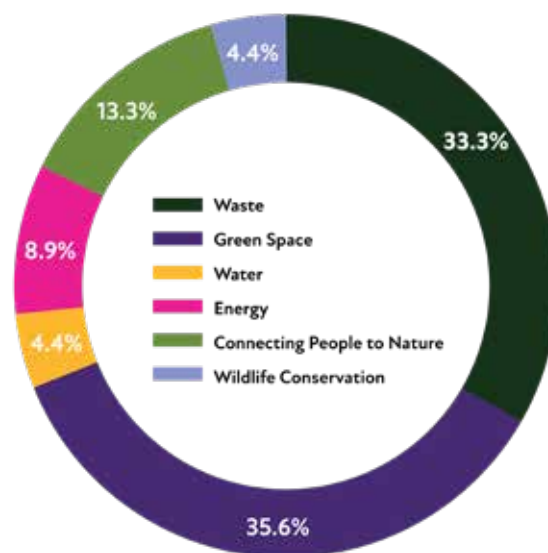
We educate our members with the support of established organizations already doing sustainability work through our C3 Expert partnerships. These partnerships allow our leaders to gain hands-on experience during their training. We empower our members to take action to create data-driven solutions with their communities and build hope for a sustainable future. We fund unlimited sustainability projects from our leaders. C3 Leaders become sustainability champions in their communities, and C3 removes barriers to action by providing funds and individualized Museum staff support for every project.

This year, thanks to a generous donor, the Nature Museum C3 team launched a brand-new section of the program dedicated to food sustainability. Historically, C3 projects completed by leaders have been focused on waste, water, energy, connecting people to nature, green space, and wildlife conservation, with the occasional project dedicated to food in the form of compost projects. This new food sustainability-focused curriculum examined critical issues like food access, sustainable agriculture, and how to lower the greenhouse gas emissions associated with our food. Throughout this 8-week course, leaders also explored how they can support Chicago's growing urban agriculture and food rescue initiatives.

"I wish you could see the children in the field. These are 3rd to 5th graders. They do an outstanding job in environmental stewardship. They are so attentive, curious, and fun, and they learn so much. They are so proud to be stewards. It is just amazing!" (Feedback from C3 Leader, Nina Khan, about her two projects in the past year, where 500 children from 4 schools in the south side of Chicago partner with HPNC, Mighty Acorns, and Master Naturalists to learn about stewardship at Jackson and Burnham Parks.)

"I love keeping spaces clean and green! It was amazing to bring a group of people together and accomplish the same goal!" (Feedback from C3 Leader, Kelli Pelc, regarding her project to clean up litter and waste in Humboldt Park)

FY25 Chicago Conservation Corps Projects



Biology

In August of 2024, the Nature Museum hired a new Curator of Turtle Conservation, Dr. Callie Klatt Golba. Dr. Klatt Golba's work elevates the Academy's role in Blanding's turtle conservation from that of a conservation partner in head-starting, to a leader in original research, guiding management efforts throughout the species range.

Throughout Fiscal Year 2025, the Nature Museum's Collections, Living Collections, and Biology teams gave 26 presentations, submitted for publication 7 times, and accepted for publication/published 6 times.

Highlights from the past fiscal year include:

Dr. Douglas Taron, Chief Curator Emeritus, was one of numerous co-authors on a paper entitled "Rapid Butterfly declines across the United States during the 21st Century." This paper was published in the journal *Science* and has received extensive media coverage. Reports about the paper have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *The Guardian*, *ABC News*, *CBS News*, *CNN*, *NPR*, *The BBC*, *Reuters*, and *National Geographic*.

Dr. Allison Sacerdote-Velat gave the keynote presentation "It's not easy being green: Take-aways from 15 years of *Opheodrys vernalis* conservation & natural history" at the Ohio Partners in Amphibian and Reptile Conservation conference in Columbus, Ohio in April.

Our Biology and Collections teams were featured in 21 different media segments throughout fiscal year 2025. Some highlights include:

Allen Lawrance was interviewed in August about local dragonfly migrations by WBBM News Radio 780 and by the *Chicago Tribune* about the green darner dragonfly that occurred during Lollapalooza.

Dr. Klatt Golba developed an educational video in partnership with the Lake County Forest Preserve District's PR team showing how to help a turtle cross the road. This video was shared on social media for World Turtle Day and received over 3,000 views on Instagram and over 10,000 views on Facebook.

The Nature Museum is currently in the middle of a grant-funded project to research Smooth Greensnake health. Particularly, tracking snake fungal disease and heavy metal bioaccumulation.

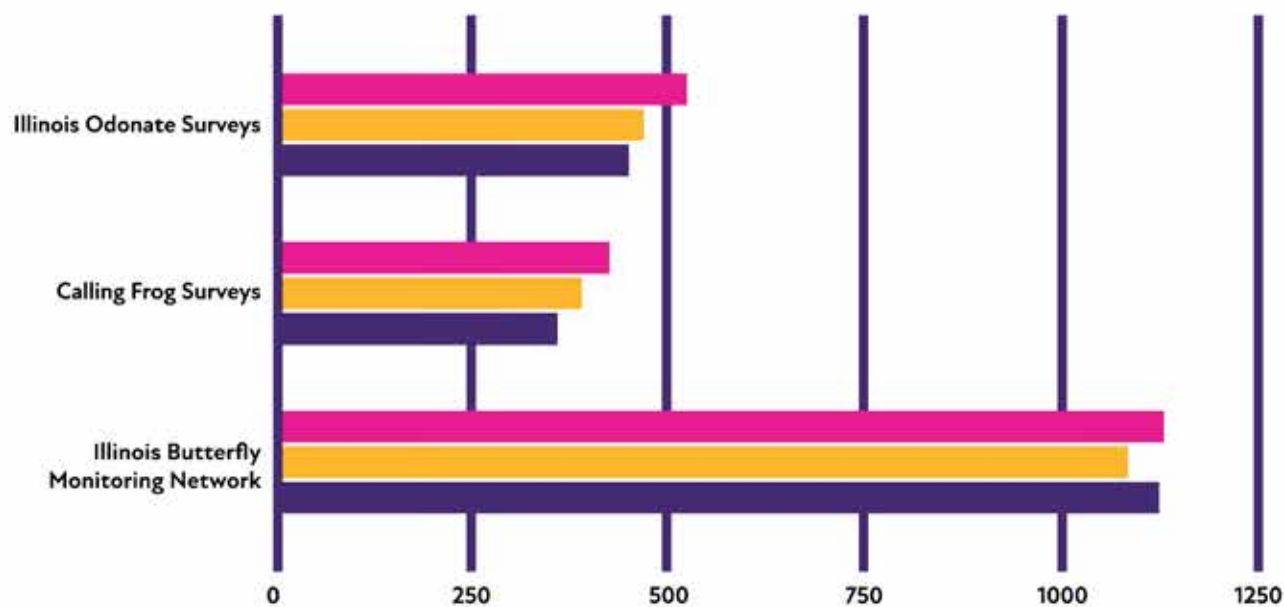
In late 2021, turtle shell fungal disease, an emerging disease that causes lesions in the shells, was detected in headstart turtles across multiple counties in Illinois. The disease is caused by a fungus called *Emydomyces testavorans*. Headstarting in Illinois was paused while researchers work to determine the source of the disease, and collaborate on treatment trials. Many partners in the Illinois Blanding's turtle recovery effort have helped conduct field sampling to determine if and where the pathogen may be present in the wild. Led by the University of Illinois Wildlife Epidemiology Lab, disease sampling includes collection of swabs and blood samples to detect presence of the fungus. The Nature Museum took part in a clinical trial to test effectiveness of a treatment with 14 Blanding's turtle headstarts that have tested positive for the fungus. This 18-month trial was just completed. The Nature Museum is now in the process of working towards making our Blanding's lab a negative (fungus free) space so that we can eventually resume our headstart program. Shedd Aquarium agreed to remain a positive facility and will be taking our 14 Blanding's turtles for further monitoring. Six of the turtles were transferred to Shedd in December 2024 and the remaining eight were transferred in June 2025.





Community Science Surveys, year over year

2024 2023 2022



Education

Educational programs are at the heart of the Nature Museum's efforts to fulfill its mission. With research and study at the core of the institution's founding, Nature Museum educators provide more hands-on contact hours with students and teachers than any other museum in the city: more than 78,000 hours each year, with ten full-time school program staff members who teach a combined total of more than 38,000 students and 1,200 teachers from schools throughout Chicago, most of which serve high percentages of low-income students primarily from Chicago Public Schools. Students learn about the natural environment and how it directly impacts their lives. These hands-on school programs are aligned with the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), and feature the Nature Museum's unique resources, from live animals to our vast preserved scientific collection.

In partnership with DePaul University's User Experience Design Capstone Class of 2025, the Nature Museum's Sustainability Center underwent an incredible digital transformation. The goal for the students was to take the already existing educational content on our digital screens in the exhibit and turn it into engaging games and content that appeal to people of all ages. Over the course of 13 weeks, the students worked together to develop these games, receiving feedback from Museum staff throughout the entire process. The result of their efforts were completely redesigned screens for each of the 5 digital components in the exhibit: Water, Economy & Culture, Energy, Food, and the Library. The finished screens make the content more accessible and engaging for all audiences, while still educating our visitors on the importance of conservation in each pillar.

Education programs and curriculum grew and expanded over the past year. We piloted new day-off camps and a program specially for tweens (ages 10-14 years old). Summer camp added another group of students to each session, bringing the joy of a summer connecting with nature to more kids, as well as increasing revenue opportunities. Education staff created 3 new Science on the Go curriculum, grounded in Next Generation Science Standards, to bring to teachers and classrooms next school year, building on our 30-year Science on the Go tradition. We partnered with the Lawndale Pop-Up Museum to bring nature connections to their Friday evening community events, and the resulting nature-inspired, community-created art work will be showcased at the Museum in the fall.

"Thank you so much for this experience! I had so much fun doing different things. I learned how to test water chemistry and about different species. My favorite part was going in the water and looking at the pretty butterflies. I had never been to the Museum so I had an amazing first time. I have so many pictures and memories there. I'm so glad you gave us this opportunity!!" (7th Grade Student participating in programming)

"I love letting them bring new things into the class to see how they are curious outside of the classroom. We use the board for questions we have from outside of school about curriculum. It has been interesting to see what they get curious about and how other students usually engage really well with peer questions versus teacher questions." (SOG participating teacher describing how they integrate student-driven inquiry into teaching)





Program Scope	FY24	FY25	FY26 Goals
Student Programs:			
Field Trip Workshops (at the Nature Museum)	719 workshops	634 workshops	740 workshops
Camp: Summer	320 campers	427 campers	440 campers
Camp: Winter	158 campers	89 campers	300 campers
Nature on the Go (in communities)	79 workshops	89 workshops	55 workshops
After School Science Club	8 schools	8 schools	8 schools
Overnights	2 events	4 events	5-6 events
Multi-touchpoint School Partnerships with Teacher Professional Development:			
Science on the Go (SOG)	198 classrooms	153 classrooms	140 classrooms
Whole School Science Partnership (SSP)	3 schools	3 schools	3 schools
Urban Nature Partnership	program on pause	34 classrooms	N/A due to funding loss
Science Teaching Network	33 teachers	32 teachers	32 teachers
Teens & Young Adults:			
DePaul undergraduate: <i>Environmental Education Theory and Practice</i>	1 quarter-long course	1 quarter-long course	1 quarter-long course
Seasonal Teen/ Young Adult Staff	22 staff and interns	25 staff and interns	25 staff and interns
Community Partnerships:			
Chicago Park District Park Voyagers	12 parks; 190 students	6 parks; 105 students	6 parks
OST Community Partnerships	19 community groups	12 community groups	10 community groups
Illinois Department of Natural Resources <small>ENTICE educator partnership workshops</small>	3 workshops, 39 educators	2 workshops, 25 educators	2 workshops

Exhibits and Community Events

The Nature Museum featured several exciting exhibits during FY25.

In Nature Cat: Backyard and Beyond, kids stepped into adventure with Fred, an ordinary house cat who once imagined himself as the fearless Nature Cat, ready to explore the great outdoors. Alongside his quirky crew—Hal the fun-loving dog, Squeeks the clever mouse, and Daisy the curious bunny—young explorers journeyed through a series of nature-inspired experiences. They crawled through tunnels, wandered through a shadowy cave, splashed down a pretend waterslide, and discovered the secrets of marshes and forests. Whether planting flowers in an urban garden or searching for Hal's lost flying disc, every activity sparked curiosity and celebrated the wild world beyond the backyard.

The Art and Science of Arachnids was an exhibit designed to explore the intriguing world of arachnids—such as spiders and scorpions—while aiming to shift public perceptions. Through a combination of art, cultural references, live specimens, and hands-on displays, the exhibit highlighted the ecological importance and advantages of these often-misunderstood creatures. It invited visitors to gain a deeper appreciation for arachnids and helped dispel common fears and myths surrounding them.

Throughout FY25, the Nature Museum displayed incredible internal collaboration and design to develop the Museum's current exhibit that is on display from June 2025 – June 2026. This exhibit is the result of many months of "all hands-on deck" cross-departmental partnership to create an exhibit that truly tells the story of the Academy and the important work done every day by our incredible team. By A Thread: Nature's Resilience dives into the science of biodiversity and what it takes to protect it—showcasing the research, conservation, and education work happening every day across the Museum and Academy. From exploring regional collections to getting hands-on with real fieldwork-inspired activities, guests of all ages will uncover the challenges of biodiversity loss and discover how they can be part of the solution.

The Nature Museum is determined to uphold and further our mission of creating a positive relationship between people and nature to grow our region's connection to the world of nature and science. Each exhibit, program, or activity at the Museum is selected with this mission in mind. The team at the Nature Museum uses art to connect visitors to nature across all areas of the Museum. In FY25, the Museum's first floor flat show exhibit space showcased art centered around nature from Molly Cranch, William Burt, and Lindsay Olson. Nature itself is art, and exists all around us. It is important to curate exhibits that feature art developed by artists from across Illinois and beyond, as their interpretation of the natural world provides visitors to the Nature Museum with the ability to develop deeper connections to the world they live in, as they are able to see images, paintings, sculptures, and more of the wildlife they see around them every day, but in an up-close and personal manner.

To celebrate the start of the summer season and engage our community in a meaningful way, we hosted Summer Nature Fest 2025, the Nature Museum's annual way to kick off the summer. This event launched simultaneously with the opening of the By a Thread: Nature's Resilience exhibit. We welcomed over 700 guests and exceeded the previous year's revenue.





Collections

The Collections team completed an Institute of Museums and Library Sciences grant to catalogue and digitize the institution's botany collection. Our team processed 6,282 specimens from the herbarium backlog, largely collected in the mid-1800s. This project culminated in 14,678 catalogue records representing 30,596 scientific herbarium specimens available online in Arctos. Using this revitalized botany collection, the Collections team created two new online exhibits in Google Arts & Culture: "The Botanical Time Capsule" and "The People and Places in Collections."

Over the last year, the Collections team was also hard at work digitizing 279 original motion picture films thanks to a grant received from the Council on Library and Information Resources that are available online through the Internet Archive and Arctos portals, as well as the Nature Museum's YouTube channel.

Additionally, the Collections team received materials from the Division of Birds at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian to add to the Nature Museum's established Reuben M. Strong manuscript collection. Strong was a local ornithologist who helped establish the Chicago Ornithological Society. Once these newly-received papers are processed, they will be open for research.

Marketing

The Nature Museum consistently received incredible coverage for temporary and self-curated exhibits, including coverage from NBC 5 Chicago, the Chicago Sun-Times, the Chicago Tribune, and Fox 32 Chicago. Additionally, our scientists and educators had several opportunities to speak to local and national outlets about conservation, showcasing the Museum staff's expertise in areas like frogs, climate change, and butterfly populations.

In partnership with the Biology team at the Nature Museum, the Marketing team participated in Reverse the Red Day on social media platforms. This event highlighted organizations working to assist endangered species. On this day, the Nature Museum, led by Dr. Allison Sacerdote-Velat, pledged to support Blanding's turtles, one of seven listed turtle species categorized as endangered or threatened in Illinois. The Nature Museum is committed to restoring the population of this endangered native species and help reestablish ecological balance to the area.





Butterfly Ball

The 27th Annual Butterfly Ball celebrated the Nature Museum’s many science education and nature conservation programs. The Butterfly Award for Exemplary Leadership was presented to Joan Walker and Leslie Burns, two long time board members. The Award for Outstanding Leadership in Community Engagement was presented to Cayley Tull and the Tullman Family Office, in honor of their incredible generosity and partnership on the Museum’s Flight of Butterflies exhibit. The 27th Annual Butterfly Ball successfully raised more than \$1.6 Million in sponsorships, paddle raise contributions, and donations to support the Nature Museum’s many activities.

Attendance and Private Events

The Nature Museum welcomed 119,638 visitors in Fiscal Year 2025. We had a 9.41% increase in membership revenue and 5.47% increase in paid visitors compared to Fiscal Year 2024. There was also an overall 6.88% increase in revenue in FY25 compared to FY24. We continue to see a steady increase in visitors each year, and anticipate seeing this trend continue in the next fiscal year. The Nature Museum is proud to have doubled private event revenue, achieving a goal of \$200,000 in FY25 (vs. \$100,000 FY24). This increase in private event revenue is part of the Nature Museum’s long-term goal of diversifying funding streams.



ATTENDANCE	July-June	FY23	FY24	FY25	FY25 vs FY24
	Paid Visitors	55,636	45,342	46,560	2.69%
	Member Visitors	30,027	37,845	36,760	-2.87%
	Comp Visitors	29,723	35,023	36,318	3.70%
	Total	115,386	118,210	119,638	1.21%
	July-June	FY23	FY24	FY25	FY25 vs FY24
REVENUE	Paid Visitors	\$466,175	\$488,689	\$515,419	5.47%
	Memberships	\$239,557	\$272,495	\$298,144	9.41%
	Total	\$705,732	\$761,184	\$813,563	6.88%
	July-June	FY23	FY24	FY25	FY25 vs FY24

Financial Stability and Operational Updates



At the end of the 2024 school year, the federal government ended the Covid-19 Emergency Relief Funds that many schools had relied on for professional development and classroom programs. At the same time, some longtime funders are shifting their priorities, and the rising cost of materials and transportation has made it more expensive to run these programs.

This halt in federal support threatens many programs and initiatives that make the Nature Museum such a powerful force for education, conservation, and community engagement. Without this critical funding, continuing our important work becomes much harder.

Looking ahead, the Museum has decided to remove all federal funding projections from its upcoming budget due to uncertainty under the current U.S. administration. While the Museum doesn't rely as heavily on federal support as many of our fellow institutions, this shift has already had a real impact. Unfortunately, several funded programs are now on pause.

In June 2024, the Nature Museum's Board of Trustees approved the FY25 organization budget with an Operating Loss after Debt Service and Capital Expenditures of \$414,000, with the intent that the organization would close this gap and balance this budget during the FY25 year, prior to the close on June 30, 2025. Despite many challenges, the Nature Museum ended the year with a \$235,000 net deficit, significantly lower than the budgeted deficit. This was achieved by additional funding from other existing and new sources, as well as cost savings across the organization. The Nature Museum is keenly attuned to expenses and has eliminated as many expenses temporarily as possible, including a hiring freeze for non-revenue driving positions. In June 2025, the Board of Trustees approved a break-even budget for FY26.

The external auditors are currently scheduled to conduct the FY25 Audit and prepare the FY25 Financial Statements in the coming months, which will be posted on our website once the Board of Trustees approves these. Additionally, in 2025, the Nature Museum successfully maintained a Platinum Seal of Transparency, the highest level attainable from GuideStar, as well as a 4-star rating from Charity Navigator, the highest level possible.

The Nature Museum's relationship with its lender, PNC, remains strong. In the continued uncertain environment, one of the Nature Museum's strategies has been to build cash reserves. The Nature Museum continues to seek ways to diversify its earned and contributed revenue streams.

Fiscal Year 2026 will continue to be a year of growth, and fundraising remains critical to the institution's success. The institution is hopeful that with continued marketing strategies and potential capital grant opportunities, it will be able to exceed the revenue goals presented in the FY26 budget.

As part of a local increase in unionization at cultural organizations, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees trade union approached Museum employees in May of 2023 to begin creating a union. The employees voted to do so. After many months of productive negotiations, the 3-year Collective Bargaining Agreement was ratified in October 2024.



Fiscal Year 2025 Donors

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Leah & Ben Rosemergy
Kim Shepherd
Morlen Sinoway and Susan Kavanaugh
James Smith
Wayne Svoboda
Cherryl Thomas
Samuel Tinaglia
Thomas Tunney
Stephanie & Paul Van Lake
Jaclyn & Ben Wallis
Donna Warren
Mike & Robin Zafirovski
Virginia Zdenahlik

Museum Staff

As of June 30, 2025

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President & CEO

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Vice President of Advancement
Erin Gallagher

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Vice President of Conservation Research*
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Callie Klatt Golba, PhD
Seth Harper
Allen Lawrance
Ashley Portala
Asa Hagen
Dania Gamez

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Senior Director of Collections
Jessica Weller

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Jonathan Pollock
Alexander Sharkey

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Head of Learning Innovation
Rebecca Brokaw
Kerry Christenson
Garrett Douglas
Maddie Fernandez
Dahlia Martinez
Sam Saffer
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Azul Nogueron
Jennifer Olson
Loren Stephens
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PEGGY NOTEBAERT

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