

The following questions and comments were submitted by webinar registrants prior to the Texas Historical Commission's Museum Services Program webinar titled "Creating Exhibits in Response to Current Events." Following the webinar on Thursday, October 1, presenter Margaret Koch, Director of the Bullock Texas State History Museum, responded to many of the thought-provoking comments and questions; **those comments and suggestions from Margaret Koch are in red below**. The webinar recording, slides, and handout are all available at www.thc.texas.gov/museumwebinars under **Archived Webinars → Exhibits**.

Have you undertaken an exhibit or program in response to events in your community? If so, what advice would you have for others?

- I find it difficult to engage many people because they want to forget/deny the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - This is understandable in many ways because of the emotion attached to current events. It might mean that if you accept where your community is currently at, you might do best at this point to document and collect, and provide historical comparisons for those few who are receptive. Never underestimate the strength and power you have to promote a factual historical narrative that people can use to understand the present.
- How do you build connections with the tribes that you seek to represent in your exhibits?
 - This is something that takes time, so while you may be introducing yourself to tribal nations, don't jump in expecting immediate trust to unfold. Also, remember that tribal nations are not all of the same mind, and they vote their leadership in as well, so their priorities can change. It is a continual process and investment on your part. Like with any group(s) that have been subjected to systematized disenfranchisement and abuse over decades, you have to earn their trust and set your own institutional ego aside. Examine your motivations for wanting to engage them, and after listening carefully to what tribal representatives tell you about their priorities, be able to answer the question of how your work with them benefits them, more than how it might benefit your institution. You should think of your institution as a steward, not owner of how they are represented, and be able to answer the question, "what are we willing to change in our narrative if the tribal nations disagree on what we thought we wanted to represent?" The reward of renewed understanding and collaboration is worth it, however.
- I am thinking of working with one of our school partnerships to do this together - perhaps as an online exhibition.
 - This is a great idea! Remember schools need resources, but also have a lot on their plate right now, so your timeframe should take that into account.
- Our current Museum guidance is not to do an exhibit if the subject is not at least 40 years old.
 - This might be a good time to request an opportunity to review your Museum mission and guidelines; how does your current policy help or hinder your relevancy to your community? Is it having any impact on your visitation and fundability, or the way in which the community perceives you?

- Community partners can provide a good opportunity to work with other organizations to further our mission.
 - This is so true, and perhaps easiest to do with existing partners who share vision and similar mission with you. For new partners, plan in extra time to develop the relationship, and listen to their priorities and motivations as well as working on your own.
- My advice is to be deeply thoughtful and provide lots of context. Most of all, just do it.
- Involve members of that event/community in the planning and execution
- Be sensitive to the state of mind and the needs of those affected.
- As events unfold, keep looking back at your regional history to uncover what led to the circumstances leading to the events.
- Keep it simple and think about who is in your community.
- Cultural heritage is an educational/cultural resource with innumerable possibilities. Even when there is no physical access.
- We had a "Record History from Home" letter writing campaign on COVID life at home changes.
- We did a quick response and are starting development on a gallery. LISTEN to PEOPLE is advice.
- Solicit input from people directly affected by events and allow them to lead the conversation.
- Organization and planning is the key for a successful event or exhibit.
- Be honest and be prepared for some people not to like your exhibition.
- Get [and use] input from the community.
- Take the time for community input.
- I used an online exhibit platform called Show and Tag for Virtual exhibits.
- COVID collection- narratives by students and faculty about educational impact.
- Exhibit on the Black Lives Matter protests using signs from the marches. Be in communication with your community. Be timely but don't rush.
- Include positive messages and feature things the guest can do.
- We are using "needs statements" from community to shape the project.
- Think it out and work with fellow staff members to achieve goals.
- Virtual programming.
- Talk to community.
- The amount of lead-time and scale/scope of the project should be aligned.
- Plan well and keep it simple. Try to do ONE THING very well. Sometimes people want to do too much.
- Keep it simple, large print, photos or artwork, make your point quickly.
- Involve as many people from diverse groups in the development phase to get the most inclusive result.

As you plan upcoming programs or exhibits, do you have any particular concerns or challenges?

There were many interrelated questions and topics raised, which have been grouped roughly under headings below. There may not be a “one size fits all” answer, but hopefully some of these ideas and suggestions will help point participants to sources of information that may help.

Budget and Resources

- How to create interesting exhibits with an extremely small staff and budget.
 - Some of the best exhibitions we’ve seen are small and inexpensive without a lot of bells and whistles. The success of an exhibit often lies in the way the text is written and the things on view to see, as well as being able to answer the question for visitors of what does the topic mean for them? When you touch them in a personal way, the exhibition will have meaning for them.
- Budget constraints and looking at what our community would benefit from in an exhibit.
 - This might be a good opportunity to utilize assistance from volunteers and students in surveying the community. AAM, AASLH, ASTEC, and the Visitor Services Association may have suggested formats that will help you get the most useful information. And remember, if you are not willing or unable to invest in change depending on the responses you receive, don’t waste time asking the questions.
- Fundraising.
 - Many foundations and philanthropists are currently shifting funding to support in the community for health and education. Do your research and find out what matters most to them, so you can determine who to pitch your idea to for the best funding potential. The worst that can happen is they say no. If you don’t ask, you don’t have the potential for them to say “yes!”
- Market uncertainty.
 - This is very real and affecting us all. Recommend thinking both short and long-term, and if your board is invested and has business leaders on it, ask them to assist you in navigating through your strategy for our uncertain market. It is a good time to focus on how the organization can be relevant to the community, so that the community sees you as a worthwhile investment.
- Ensuring thoughtful, quality product with limited resources - time, staff, funding; choosing appropriate tools/platform.
 - This is always good practice, even when financially stable. Think about what you’ve seen as a visitor that made a positive impression on you. What made it so powerful? Was there an emotional or personal connection? If you can, connect with the folks who created it and see what their process was. I’ve found that exhibit folks love to talk about their work and share what worked well, and what didn’t.
- Lack of staff, time and resources due to the pandemic.
 - We feel you on this one! First, be kind to yourself and your team. You may want to take advantage of every opportunity, but that might just leave you feeling more overwhelmed, and honestly, the digital learning environment these days is over-saturated. Select a few mission critical things to focus on, and ease up on the pressure to do more. Many of us have much more personal stress on us, and we still want to give our best at work. Be gentle and

forgiving with your in-house team and focus on what is most important in the short term. Look at options for long term strategizing that might make you all stronger down the road.

- How to give honorariums to program presenters when our budget has been slashed? We have no revenue coming in to recoup expenses.
 - Talk with your board and see if each board member is willing to take on an honorarium for one of the presenters temporarily, with you giving them credit and acknowledgement for doing so. You could talk with your presenters and see if any of them are, just for the time-being, willing to forego an honorarium (not ideal, but if you don't have funds, you either can't do the program or you can't pay them). Can you charge for the program and give presenters a percentage of the box-office take? Perhaps you could barter for services? Do they need social media promotion? Do they have a family who might benefit from a Museum membership? Are there products from the gift store that would round out their Christmas list of equal value? Get creative.

Design Process and Space

- How to be more inclusive of people with limited mobility or abilities.
 - There are great resources through the American Alliance of Museums and the Association for Science and Technology Centers that have been compiled over decades that will help you with this, and many of the recommendations are basic and don't require a huge investment. And please, never put a multi-media experience on the floor without open captioning! Also, from past partnerships with organizations who serve those with varied mobility issues, guests seem to be most comfortable utilizing their own devices to access information, which means that investing in equipment you have to train them to be comfortable with, might not be the best option for anyone.
- Redesign of Indigenous section of permanent exhibit.
 - This is a bit out of the scope of this workshop, but there are many good resources and books on the subject. Check out what the Smithsonian's Museum of American Indians is doing, if you don't know where to begin.
- Selecting the best materials for pictorial exhibit, packing for shipping
 - Start with our Tip Sheet!
- We need a long turnaround time for most exhibits or displays (planning, approval, execution)-- would like to move faster.
 - Begin a conversation about where the 'stop-gaps' are in your process, and why they exist, and that may help you determine what would need to change, what the risks are, and what is actually feasible.
- We have a small one room mini museum located inside the front door of the county courthouse.
 - Small spaces can be great for creating a focus for a community trauma or celebration!
- Trying to keep people safe by utilizing outdoor space as much as possible. Exhibits for outdoors?
 - We hear more about this these days; look for inspiration from Texas Parks and Wildlife as well as the National Park Service. QR codes that lead to content could be a great lower cost resource for what you want to do.
- We have very limited space and want to plan for future flexibility in using it.

Digital

Many of these questions were out of the scope of this webinar, however, a few were covered in the recording, and others we've highlighted with a few suggestions.

- Not sure, mostly about privacy.
 - Great that you are thinking about this. AAM and the Oral History Association should have templates you can use for permissions.
- Advice for applying these principles to web exhibits or other virtual resources for museums that remain closed due to COVID?
 - Whether onsite or online, the basic principles for planning remain the same, but if you're going online, you need to know first if your format, and your website or social media channels have enough bandwidth for you to avoid technical issues. THC has several webinars that deal with low-investment digital media development.
- Hateful people having a platform on social media.
 - We touched on this briefly in the recorded Q and A. Have your talking points ready and your reasoning why you undertook the project, and know ahead of time what you will respond to on social media and what isn't worth debating.
- Getting word out to virtual attendees.
- Yes - how to program/virtual programming ideas for the next year, when people may be hesitant to gather in physical groups.
- I am trying to create a virtual exhibit from our organization's Collection remotely, with the aid of an intern who has access.
- My usual exhibit space (display cases) are in a now closed area. How have people taken exhibits online?
- Digital maneuvering for the public and change to new technologies
- Whether to create digital exhibits or physical exhibits.
How do we set up a collection team and policy for rapid response collecting. How do we set about building virtual exhibitions?

Stakeholder Buy-in

Stakeholders may be your funders, your staff, your volunteers, your communities, your board. Many of the comments raised below show how these concerns are very connected to our current social environment, and hopefully tips in the recording will point participants in the right direction. There are also dozens of recent webinars on the topics participants raised; see the THC website for a list of resources. One of the most crucial pieces of advice that we can give is based on the advice from Smithsonian Executive Director, Lonnie Bunch, and that is to "get your own house in order" before you start taking on exterior facing projects requiring sensitivity and responsible stewardship of people's histories. This applies no matter what the subject matter, and we've highlighted a few with additional comments.

- Will the public come?
 - Sometimes you don't know until you try, that's why the planning is so critical to success, and why you need to define how you measure success, too.

- Yes, highlighting our COVID rapid response collecting initiative. Recognizing the public may have COVID fatigue.
 - You might ask yourself what are the basics you would like to collect, and then make sure you are reporting back to the community, but don't oversaturate them. If they are dealing with a personal health crisis, appreciate that you and your initiative are not going to be a priority for them just now).
- Yes, gallery with collecting initiative. How to include communities and not marginalize or traumatize or take their stories.
 - LISTEN to your communities. Frame the conversation as "stewarding" and as you develop the exhibition, use first person story telling without narration or too much copy editing. Also, make sure you have permission forms signed and that you've fully helped participants understand how their story will be used/highlighted/shared.
- Community pushback.
 - This is a good opportunity to assess who you are and where the community is at in their thinking, and where you want to be.
- My primary complication is navigating internal systemic structure that inhibits responsive. action.
 - Try to put yourself in an administrator's shoes. If you were them, what questions would you need to answer for stakeholders to show the project is worth the time and money investment?
- When staff feel overbooked, what are some ways to help them feel excited by a "quick response exhibit" and work more quickly?
 - You've got to give permission for other responsibilities to be suspended temporarily and reset priorities so they literally have time to work on the project. Also, not everyone is going to be on the same page and may be afraid of such an undertaking. Leadership has to have their back, listen well to concerns, provide support, and vision. If the project is successful because of that leadership, staff will be more excited the next time around.
- Responding quickly to issues of race, gender/sexuality, etc. in a timely but sensitive and thoughtful way.
 - Ask yourself if you need to respond "quickly." Is that the most important factor in moving forward?
- As a Court House Museum, we often face the challenges of talking about racial disparities in the justice system. Any advice?
 - You are ideally situated in a space where you can use actual law cases in context! There are great opportunities here, using both legal arguments and popular opinion from newspapers of the day. Check out what the Eastern State Penitentiary did with some of their exhibitions on incarceration, too.
- Our board is divided on how to present racism and community has either nostalgia or hate for our person/subject.
 - Perhaps the conversation needs to shift a bit, and come back to what do you want visitors to come away with, is it a better understanding of the complexities of the individual's humanness, or just a part of who they were? Why can't both stories be told? Perhaps it isn't really about presenting racism, perhaps it is more about acknowledging and understanding

racist behavior, influence, and choices made in the past that still impact the community today.

- Lack of engagement.
 - A question for you, is this lack of engagement on the part of staff or visitors?
- Challenge: including opposing viewpoints, for example proponents of wearing mask or those that are anti-mask.
 - So this is one of those dilemmas that our colleagues in science museums would say is not a matter of opinion, but scientific fact vs. personal belief (viewpoints). Sometimes multiple perspectives are good to have through original letters and documents, but if there is factual information that is verifiable, use that to give context and enlightened perspective.
- Planning an exhibit to accompany a new education program on black history.
- Being responsive without being irresponsible.
- We need to update our physical site but are faced with COVID-19 backlash for "wanting to attract tourists."
- Just how to present information that informs and is non-biased and how to deal with visitors who see it as biased.
- Building timelines that can include many voices but also respond quickly to current events
- Staffing, opposition to topics by some in leadership positions
- Diversity and representation.
- Being inclusive, sensitive, balance between objective and subjective, reaching wide audiences in a valuable way
- leadership not wanting to take risks.
- Sensitivity & controversy.
- I'm concerned about being sensitive to people's experiences and trauma.
- Administration, inclusivity.
- Dealing with sensitive topics.
- Mostly attendance and ROI (Return on Investment).
- How to be genuine and not do token projects that could hurt future relationships in the community.
- Be aware of impact on homeless community in our region.
- We're a law enforcement museum and want to be respectful of the political climate and our stakeholders.
- Our visitor and audience response.
- Interest, accessibility, and outreach.
- Getting leadership on board with tackling "political" events.
- Mostly just being sensitive.
- Yes - Cultural sensitivity.
- How can we respond to the "present" when we are not an agile institution? How can we be authentic but not comprehensive?
- Concerned about accessibility.
- Address events in a way that doesn't create more polarization, create discussion in a safe/respectful space, mediation tactics.
- There is always a heavy amount of institutional pushback from top leadership.

- Potential political/cultural differences of opinion within the community regarding interpretation or relative importance.
- Support from faculty.
- We want to do an exhibit re: racial disparities and health, and want to avoid polarizing our audience.
- Communication affects our response time. These exhibits require rapid response collecting & relevant voices to tell the stories.
- We would like to better incorporate community feedback and develop associated programming that addresses community needs.
- Adaptiveness.
- Staying relevant and coming in under budget.

Location

- We have exhibits and programs on our agenda. Doing field research over several hundreds of miles is a challenge.
 - You certainly have your hands full with this challenge, and we at the Bullock Museum can relate. Never underestimate picking up the phone and talking with colleagues first, or partnering on grants that would provide funding for several organizations to work together.

COVID-19 Protocols and Safety

While a bit outside of the scope of this webinar, in the past few months there have been excellent webinars on protocol and what organizations have implemented, changed and trained their staff and volunteers on. They are literally happening every week. See THC's recommendations for resources.

- We have eliminated or downscaled all touch interactives in our exhibits—advice on how to engage without interaction?
 - The Children's Museum Association and ASTC are grappling with this. www.astc.org and www.childrensmuseums.org and might have advice to share.
- Planning for Smithsonian traveling exhibit "Crossroads: Change in Rural America," July 2021; may incorporate pandemic response.
 - Go for it!
- Where/how to show the exhibit with closures, making contact with museums as we do not have a location ourselves.
 - You might wish to consider talking with Humanities Texas or any one of the traveling exhibition organizations who specialize in this.
- Collecting and preserving contemporary objects that are made of plastic/cardboard.
 - From the most recent testing by conservation labs, it looks like quarantining items is going to be the best approach. www.nedcc.org
- How to display early school textbooks without damaging them.
 - Light levels and/or handling are going to be the biggest issue, which will limit the amount of time they can be on view. If you're a small museum, larger museums in your community or nearby might be able to walk you through what they do.
- Concerns- being socially distant, audio concerns (hearing impaired).
- Planning exhibits with safe distancing in mind.

- Switching out the exhibits while still being open to the public.
- How to adapt displays to keep people moving, separated, and hands off while still being engaging
- Yes, the gradual return to normal and its impact on public libraries especially in our remote area.
- How have other institutions creatively dealt with new social distancing recommendations and installing/ de-installing exhibits?
- capturing the current COVID climate and its impact locally
- the challenge for staff of engaging with visitors while social distancing. any tips?
- Crafting them as virtual or with social distancing in mind.
- How to safely share artifacts and do programs in this time of COVID.
- How to make exhibits safe for visitors?
- The general uncertainty of the future of the pandemic, its effect on budgets, capacities, on types of experiences we can offer
- Dealing with COVID and how to still engage with the community.
- We are making an exhibit about bats/zoonotic diseases/COVID-19.
- COVID-19 and weather.