

The Science Museum of Virginia

More than a quarter-century ago a five-member Museum of Science Advisory Commission reported to the Governor and General Assembly of Virginia that “few agencies can be devised to advertise what we have to offer ourselves, or others, and to direct the interests of both young and old in building a greater Virginia than . . . a properly set up and administered State museum of science.”

These men, two of whom-Dr. George W. Jeffers and Dr. William T. Sanger-remain active museum supporters, of vision and imagination called for the museum to be functional, both within and without its building, in a dynamic, educational way; becoming a real science center. “a veritable beehive of activity for all classes.”

Today, their dream, carefully nurtured and enlarged by thousands of interested individuals and hundreds of groups and organizations throughout Virginia, stands on the threshold of reality.

Spearheaded by the Virginia Academy of Science and other learned organizations, a comprehensive Museum Study Commission report in 1969 was the basis for concrete action by the General Assembly in 1970. Prior to that several efforts to effectuate the museum were unsuccessful.

Senate Bill No. 8 created the Science Museum of Virginia, outlined its purposes, and authorized appointment of a nine-member Board of Trustees. An operating budget for the 1970-72 biennium also was approved.

Trustee appointments were completed by the Governor in February, 1971, and the selection reflects probably the most diverse geographic representation of any state institution. Board members include: Dr. Roscoe D. Hughes, Richmond, chairman; Dr. T. Dale Stewart, McLean, vice chairman; Mrs. William A. Stuart, Jr., Rosedale, secretary; Mrs. J. T. Bird, Sulem; Dr. Avery Catlin, Charlottesville; Lyons Davidson, Lynchburg; Mrs. William T. Reed, Jr., Manakin-Sabot; Harold Soldinger, Norfolk; and William J. Vaughan, Virginia Beach.

Since March they have been formulating the basic concepts of a statewide museum system, and these efforts are reflected through many positive policy decisions. For example, the Board has:

- * Agreed that the museum system should include facilities in three or four population centers around the state; that “outreach” centers (existing structures such as small nature museums or community colleges) would be used for display of exhibits and collections on a temporary basis; that mobile units would be utilized to make periodic visits to areas without adequate display space; and that educational television would supplement all these to carry the message of science to all corners of the state.
- * Approved an appropriations request of \$432,197 from the state for the 1972-74 biennium. These funds would be used primarily for employment of a skeletal professional staff, acquisition of the necessary space for the storage and cataloguing of exhibits, displays, and collections for later use in the museum system, and for master planning. Development of a total master plan, to include the type of museum facility for each proposed location, would provide the foundation for the entire system.
- * Set a fund raising goal of \$5 million during 1972-75 to supplement state revenue. The Board will look to foundations, corporations, and other private sources; the Federal Government; and localities that have expressed an interest in a museum facility.
- * Launched a preliminary feasibility study of sites in three areas-Lynchburg, Norfolk, and

Roanoke to determine land availability. Similar studies are expected for Richmond and Portsmouth, following presentations by each city in the fall.

“Local enthusiasm has been extraordinary,” Dr. Hughes has stated, “and the Board is keenly aware of this spirit of cooperation.” He further indicated that site evaluations being done now are for planning purposes only, and by “no means intended as final decisions.”

Along with the local interest, various groups and organizations on the state level have indicated support for the museum program. Edward S. Harlow recently was appointed chairman of the VAS Science Museum Advisory Committee.

As part of its broad information program, advisory committees also are being organized within communities seeking a museum facility, and the Board welcomes comments and suggestions from all interested citizens.

Each initial museum facility would provide a different feature, as directed by the enabling legislation, and each would be carefully designed to ensure a harmonious relationship between the structure and the natural environment. Along with education, major emphasis is placed on the museum’s role in the field of ecology.

Approved by the General Assembly are:

- * Physical Sciences—To include a planetarium and depict the history, concepts, and basic principles of such sciences as physics, chemistry, astronomy, and mathematics.
- * Botanical Sciences—Primarily to educate in the kinds and uses of Virginia flora, and demonstrate the need for new horticultural varieties in the state.
- * Natural History—Would be devoted primarily to Virginia’s natural resources, as well as paleontological and archeological artifacts and specimens.
- * Industry and Technology—To communicate the history, evolution, and development of Virginia’s industry.
- * Oceanography and Limnology—To include an oceanarium and be concerned with Virginia’s total aquatic life and its environment.
- * Zoological Gardens—For the preservation of wildlife and viewing in their natural habitat.