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TO: Joint Legislative Oversight Committee on Agriculture and Natural and Economic Resources

FROM: Tom Earnhardt, Chair, North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences Advisory Commission

RE: North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences Advisory Commission, Report FY 2019-20

DATE: September 28, 2020

In accordance with General Statute §G.S. 143B-135.221, the Advisory Commission (“the Commission”) of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences (“the Museum” or “the NCMNS”) is pleased to submit this 2020 Report. Following our online Commission meeting via “Zoom” on July 24, we offer this report as the advisory body of the Museum, a division of the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (DNCR).

Education, Facilities, Outreach and Attractions

Like every other segment of state government that interacts directly with the public, the Museum of Natural Sciences has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the Museum has been closed to visitors since March 17, its dedicated staff has been extraordinarily active. Members of the staff responsible for facilities, security, and animal care have continued to work throughout 2020 to maintain the living collections and to improve and protect our world-class facilities. While the Museum has been closed to the public, leaders at the Museum and DNCR have used the opportunity to replace the escalator, repair the elevators, and do long-needed work on the “Betsy M. Bennett Bridge” over Salisbury Street connecting our two main buildings. Painting, refurbishment, general maintenance and enhancement of Wi-Fi capabilities have taken place in both buildings during 2020.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Museum has expanded its online operations as a “virtual museum.” Significant high-quality educational content has been created as the Museum has pivoted to being a “virtual museum.”

During this difficult year, a classroom was converted for use as an on-line studio specializing in live-stream digital. Even though many staff members did their jobs remotely, the staff and leadership of NCMNS seized the opportunity to enhance online instruction.

From the very beginning, this Museum was intended to be a statewide resource, and not just a Raleigh resource. Throughout the pandemic the Museum's satellite facility in Whiteville (Columbus County) has done important science outreach across Southeastern North Carolina. The Museum will soon formalize a similar partnership in Greenville (Pitt County). As the Advisory Commission we are delighted that the leadership at DNCR and the Museum are continuing to advance and improve the Museum's service and outreach to all regions of the state.

The reemergence of the exhibit *Race 2.0* is underway. The Museum is in discussions with Raleigh Convention Center to show the exhibit while the Museum updates the content for touring across the state and region. The Museum will also create online content for the exhibit and is also exploring the construction of kiosks based on the exhibition for libraries across the state.

As we write this report, the Museum staff has just re-opened our Jones Street facilities to the public on September 22. Buildings and exhibits are open to a reduced number of visitors while following all applicable public health guidelines and sanitation protocols to protect the public and staff.

Since our report in 2019 a new Museum Director, Dr. Eric Dorfman, was chosen following a comprehensive international search (see below). Eric Dorfman began his work at approximately the same time the pandemic changed lives across North Carolina and the nation. In addition to overseeing many of the physical changes mentioned above, Dr. Dorfman has also championed the drafting of a new Strategic Plan—the product of considerable consultation with the entire Museum staff and community members across the state. The plan, ready by end of this calendar year, will chart an ambitious course for the Museum in its next phase of development. Important themes emerging from this initiative are maintaining our prominence in North Carolina's knowledge and tourism economies, as well as being leaders in the state's support of underserved communities.

Finally, the Advisory Commission would be remiss if it did not acknowledge the extraordinary leadership of Alvin Braswell, who came out of retirement to serve as the Museum's Interim Director during the search process. Alvin, an internationally known herpetologist, has held almost every position possible at the museum, including many years as Deputy Museum Director for Operations. We are all deeply indebted to Alvin Braswell for his service and for a half century of science excellence.

Director Search and New Director

It has long been clear that North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences is one of the finest natural science museums in America today. Our enviable position required an international search to find the best possible director. With funding from Friends of the Museum of Natural Sciences the search process spanned much of 2019. The Search Committee (a diverse committee from inside and outside the Museum community), working with DNCR Secretary Susi Hamilton and Chief Deputy Reid Wilson, identified Dr. Eric Dorfman, a California native with national and international museum experience.

Prior to joining NCMNS this year, Eric Dorfman served as the Director of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and Powdermill Nature Reserve in Pittsburgh. Dorfman also had 13 years of museum leadership experience in New Zealand. The Commission members met him online during a “virtual” Advisory Commission meeting, and we are all thrilled to welcome Eric Dorfman to the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences.

Requests, Needs, and Concerns

1. A new dinosaur exhibit is slated to be announced in January, with the groundbreaking of the exhibit and laboratory space tentatively planned for May 2021. The Advisory Commission wishes to thank the General Assembly for its past generous support of the exhibit and lab. The Advisory Commission agrees with Museum leadership that five (5) new science positions are needed to prepare the specimens and to open the exhibit. We also agree with leadership that the opportunities and magnitude of this exhibit will require up to 10 more positions in future years to assist with the exhibit and to manage other aspects of the paleontological collection.
2. As part of the strategic plan, Eric Dorfman and the staff have also identified the need to create a master plan for our Gold Star Drive Campus (Prairie Ridge Eco Station), creating a structure that would tie together the site’s public, conservation and scientific-facing roles. The Advisory Commission recommends **additional planning money** for a master plan for this campus.
3. Every year thousands of hours are given to the Museum by its dedicated volunteers. Suffice it to say that to replace the roles filled by volunteers, the Museum would need many new permanent positions. The Advisory Commission believes that the least we can do for these volunteers, many of whom are retired, is to provide free, nearby parking. In addition to their volunteer work many of these volunteers pay for metered parking and walk long distances. We urge the Executive Branch and the General Assembly to work

closely with leadership of DNCR to provide **adequate, free, nearby parking for the Museum's valued volunteers.**

4. The Advisory Commission wishes to note that online programs and cutting-edge science education offered by the Museum and its regional affiliates are successful only when students have **access to broadband internet service** in their communities. This is not just a Museum issue, but an issue of great importance to every North Carolinian, and especially those who live in less prosperous Tier 1 counties. We urge leaders in the Executive Branch and the General Assembly to do everything possible to solve this "digital divide."

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Advisory Commission of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Earnhardt". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent initial "T" and a long, sweeping underline.

Tom Earnhardt, Chair