

MUSEUM NOTE

GOVERNANCE: Municipal Museums

Municipally operated museums are participants in the larger municipal task of improving the lives of local citizens. Understanding this can either lead to a crisis of identity for an institution, its staff and volunteers, or it can be tremendously empowering.

The challenge for museums in a municipal governance structure is that they provide non-legislated 'soft' services that compete with 'hard' and legally mandated municipal tasks. Good governance structures and clear communication can help museums compete with a municipality's other mandates.

As a governing body of a community museum, this tip sheet will help you to comply with the Ontario government's **Governance Standard** outlined in the *Standards for Community Museums in Ontario*.

Standards enable community museums to:

- provide the appropriate care and management of collections
- meet visitors' expectations
- be accountable and transparent to the community, funders, and donors

Objective of the Governance Standard

As a community museum, you must be governed according to standards and be open and accountable to the public for your decisions.

The majority of community museums in Ontario are municipally operated, or they can be affiliated with Conservation Authorities and universities. Municipally operated museums can also be operated by upper-tier (regional) or lower-tier (city, town, village) levels of government.

Municipal museums operate within the supports and restrictions of:

- their municipality's policies, procedures and by-laws
- a Regional Official Plan
- *Ontario Municipal Act, 2010*
- *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)*
- *Ontario Human Rights Code*
- *Ontario Heritage Act*

A municipal museum can be operated:

1. by a Board of Management
2. by a Municipal Service Board

3. by a Committee of Council (such as Administration and Finance or Parks and Recreation)
4. as a line unit or municipal program

If your museum is operated by a Board of Management or Municipal Service Board, operational functions such as budget management, hiring and firing can be delegated to them, depending on the by-law.

If your museum is governed by a Council Committee, the Council Committee would function as the Museum's Board in terms of approving de-accessions, but an Advisory Committee would provide input on program development and community engagement.

If your museum is part of a line unit or municipal program, few operational functions can be delegated. Planning documents, policies and mission statements must be consistent with other Council-approved documents. For example, the Hamilton Civic Museum Policy must be consistent with Hamilton City's Council's approved Cultural Plan and its mission, vision and values.

Municipal councils have the ultimate responsibility for all municipal institutions including their museums.

While Council is solely responsible for the museum, the municipality may wish to consider employing partners (such as support groups or Friends organizations) as representatives of the communities it serves to provide the museum with advice on planning, mission and policy review, as well as fundraising for the museum.

Advantages of Municipal Governance

1. Municipal governance of museums, in general, provides a number of benefits, including stable, reliable funding. Museums are generally funded by the municipal tax levy. This is stable and usually reliable funding that provides considerable flexibility for the museum's business planning
2. Centralized services. The museum benefits from a variety of centralized services, for example, snow removal. The extent, quality and cost of these services varies from place to place but generally benefits museum operation
3. Public trust. The governing body is publicly elected and required legislatively to act in the public trust.
4. Service to communities. Municipalities are mandated to work for the benefit and health of their communities by providing a range of economic development, social services, public health and infrastructure. Museum operation is compatible with this mandate.
5. Staff salaries and benefits. Staff salaries and benefits are aligned with other positions of similar responsibility, experience and education requirements within the parent organization.

6. Additionally, most municipal planning is done within the context of a four year term of council, which can be an advantage, as other key planning documents such as cultural plans are also tied to this period of time. It is the job of municipal museum managers to pursue opportunities for plan alignment and look for ways to advance the museum's interests by working within the larger system.

Challenges for Community Museums

Overall challenges include:

1. Greater administrative overhead is the chief challenge, and goes hand-in-hand with stable funding. Hiring, firing, procurement, approval and many other core administrative functions all have many more layers in a municipal context and museum leaders working in a municipal context must devote a considerable portion of their time to working with and servicing these systems.
2. Vulnerable to budget cuts. A municipality must offer a range of services such as library services and various social and infrastructure services. Some services - like recreation or culture are not required by legislation. They are considered 'soft services' and can be more vulnerable to budget cuts.
3. Smaller voice. Museums are a small part of a larger municipal bureaucracy that emphasizes corporate-wide standardization and control. This can hamper the ability of a museum to be fully effective, responsive and adaptive.

There are also other challenges for a community museum governed by a larger parent body, such as a municipality, that are specific to its:

- public trust role
- service role
- mission or purpose.

These challenges include:

- **By-laws and policies**, written to govern all aspects of the organization in general, can restrict ethical and public service museum responsibilities, such as:
 - deaccessioning of collections
 - strategic planning and other community involvement in planning and service delivery
 - volunteer training
 - job descriptions, work and health and safety
 - fundraising for museum capital projects, or other specific purchases such as artworks
 - museum membership, when museum is in a municipal department

- **Municipal business plans** with a one-year focus that do not allow a museum to strategically plan for its future
- **Generic municipal emergency plan**, rather than museum-specific emergency and disaster recovery plan, that does not:
 - address disaster recovery for building and collections
 - provide easily accessible contacts for emergencies that occur on weekends and evenings when museums are open to the public
 - provide training for volunteers or part-time staff who may be working at the museum on weekends
 - address staff, volunteer, student or visitor emergencies that may occur in outdoor settings, use open fires, heritage equipment, livestock, etc.
- **Municipal firewalls and website restrictions** that:
 - do not provide museum staff with e-mail contact information
 - block the use of social media to engage and share information with the public, or restricts its use to the municipality's marketing department
 - blocks e-mail communication from funders and other stakeholders
- **Governing body** that is unaware of and has no commitment to museum ethical guidelines e.g. Canadian Museums Association, International Committee Of Museums (ICOM) that are not addressed by municipal codes of ethics

Tips to help you overcome these challenges:

Familiarize yourself with the policies of your municipality. You should:

1. read and understand the Municipal Act
2. read and understand the enabling by-law that established your museum
3. create your policy commitments using the *Standards for Community Museums in Ontario* requirements for the operation of a good community museum
4. talk to municipal staff about the best ways to address your challenges

For example, if the Human Resources policy does not mention volunteers (e.g., training, insurance, health & safety etc.) ask if:

- the museum can be included in a policy or procedure exists for other municipal areas such as community centres or libraries and/or
- the museum can develop its own volunteer policy or a codicil to the overarching Human Resources policy

If the municipality's emergency and disaster response plan does not address a museum's specific issues such as emergencies outside of business hours ask if a site specific plan can be developed

Recommended Resources

Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Compliance
<http://www.aodacompliance.com>

Kerr-Wilson, Ian. *Municipal Systems and Museum Operations*. Presentation at Ontario Museum Association Conference, Markham, 2013 <http://newsarticle.museumsontario.com/members/Conf2013/WrapUp/Presentations/MunicipalSystemsAndMuseumOperations-IanKerrWilson.pdf>

Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport. *Standards for Community Museums in Ontario*. http://www.mtc.gov.on.ca/en/museums/museums_standards.shtml

Town of Oakville Museum Policy and related procedures <http://www.oakville.ca/townhall/ms-rec-001.html>

Municipal Act, Province of Ontario
http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/statutes/english/elaws_statutes_01m25_e.htm