

## Strategic directions: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania

*To the HSP Board,*

The Historical Society Pennsylvania (HSP) finds itself at a crossroads for the coming millennium. With national economic instability and internal funding quandaries before us, we must act to ensure the futurity of the Society. Of the three options presented by president/CEO Susan Stitt, I support the so-called “get smaller to get better” strategy for the future of HSP. The option to downsize and deaccession the museum collection is controversial, though essential in helping HSP refocus itself as an institution committed to a clear mission. With our membership in decline and our revenue fluctuating, it remains our duty to the HSP and its constituencies to affect lasting change for the better.

### ***Mission statement***

As of 1988, HSP subscribes to the following mission statement:

- It will COLLECT the best available evidence in *keeping with its Collections Policy*;
- It will PRESERVE its collections and assets by improvements to physical plant, by improvements to storage of collections, by an alternative text program, and by a planned conservation program;
- It will MAKE AVAILABLE its collection more fully by improved cataloguing, *mounting a permanent exhibition*, by sponsoring fellowships, symposia, and publications.
- It will actively COMMUNICATE with its constituencies—both established and new—what this generation needs to know about the past to encourage the widest possible understanding and the wonder of discovery. (emphasis added)

A couple of items from the mission statement seem relevant to our decision-making process and begin my recommendation to the board.

## ***Recommendation***

First, the current and future Collections Policy should be a central point of discussion in our consideration of the future of HSP. The goals of that Policy should align with the broader HSP mission statement. There should be analysis done on whether this is currently the case. We should collect those resources which will “encourage the widest possible understanding” and “wonder of discovery” and thus preserve for, make available to and communicate resources to our constituencies. A recent user study found that 79% of our members have utilized the research collections, in some capacity. Therein lies the strength of our offerings.

Second, the current mission statement includes the clause to mount “a permanent exhibition.” If the board decides to move forward with a lean-focused model of library/archival services without an exhibit, this aspect of the mission statement will need to be amended. In order to maintain a quality-centered operation, our defined mission should be centered on delivering access to library/archival services. The user study again suggests a needed refocusing of our efforts. Also, those surveyed have suggested a lack of space for our exhibits. We should deaccession as much of our museum collection as possible while also maintaining a research relationship with whatever institution(s) we find to house the objects. Of course, this process should be handled with care so as to prevent misappropriation of funds or illegal/unethical transfers of realia.

Since our staff's wages constitute 66% of our expenditures, I would recommend looking at how our staff can be reorganized to free up more operating funds. Do we have too many administrative staff on hand? What is sufficient in this regard? HSP should provide the best service, concentrating on our users, while being fair and equitable to our employees.

We must retain our experts in cataloguing, research and preservation to remain an institution of note and to provide the best service to our users and members. In this regard, I also suggest that we further investigate the possibility of housing the Philadelphia City archives in our collection. Not only

will this collection provide a needed home for such important history, but the prestige of supporting this project will reap potential donations from those tied to other influential Philadelphia non-profits and investment firms.

Our future is bright if we choose to react, to adapt, and to seize this moment in our great state's history. To become lean in the face of economic uncertainty is essential and to refocus our mission will ensure our futurity in duty to our membership. We can proceed with success in hand.