

# Behind the Scenes

## Community Support is the Key to a Great Museum

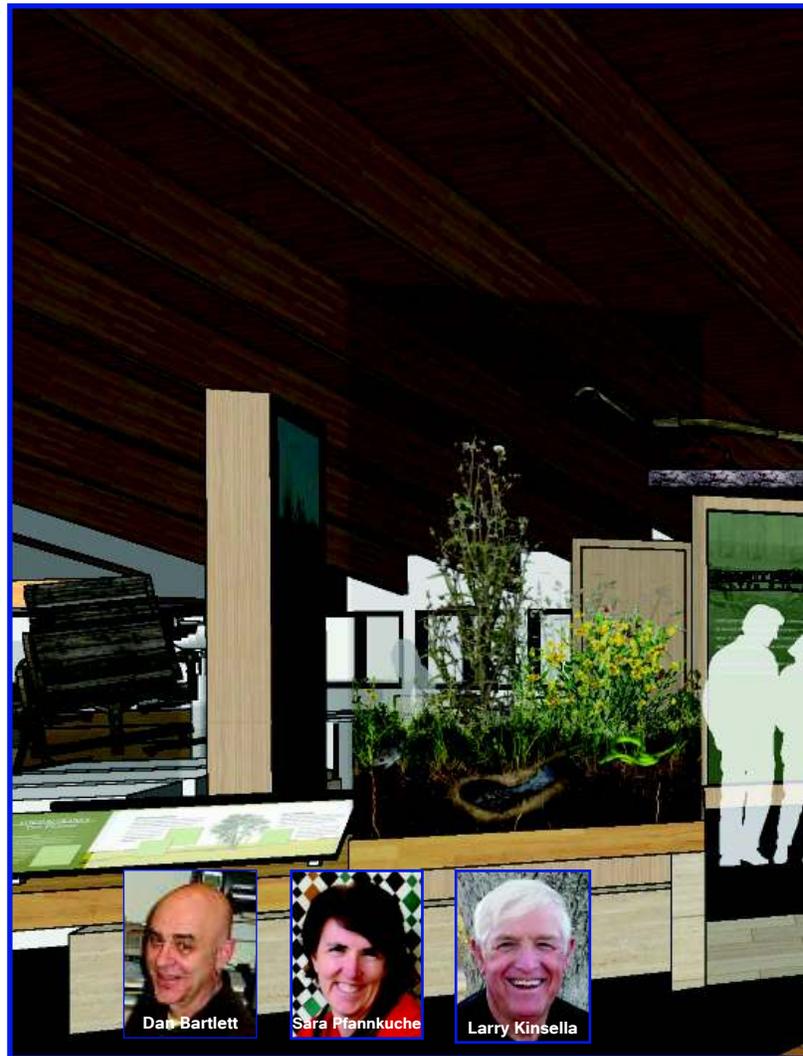
By Mark Herman, Superintendent of Education

It's the support from the community and their attention to details that turns a good project into a great project. Our new Jarrett Prairie Center Museum renovation is a prime example of this. After over two years of thoughtful research and planning, the new expanded Jarrett Prairie Center Museum will be installed starting in early September...and it will be worth the wait.

The project began back in April 2014 when Split Rock Studios of St. Paul, Minnesota and ObjectIDEA of Boston, Massachusetts were selected to design, fabricate and install a new museum that would tell the story of our unique prairie ecosystem and how people have interacted with it for thousands of years. Matt Kirchman, Director of ObjectIDEA, served as the designer for this project. He started out his career as a Museum Educator with the Jarrett Prairie Center Museum back in 1993 so he knows our prairies very well.

During the planning process, it was determined that one of the main purposes of this project was to attract more school groups to use our facilities and have them experience a new hands-on science and social studies curriculum. Elementary school teachers were brought in from the Byron, Oregon, Meridian, and Rockford School Districts to get their feedback regarding the new exhibit content and design. A new science and social studies curriculum was developed to go along with the new museum themes and interactive exhibits.

Members of our Restoration Department helped select the species of plants that would be depicted in bloom for three life-sized prairie ecosystem dioramas (dry prairie, bur oak savanna, and wetland prairie). Education Department staff provided re-



search and materials relating to specific plants, insects, birds, and mammals for the Split Rock Studios' artists to use to make the dioramas more realistic. The Forest Preserve staff also gathered, cut and dried several species of prairie grasses and plants for use in the dioramas.

For the new museum's Prairie Lifestyles exhibit, we consulted with Dan Bartlett, Curator of Exhibits and Education at the Logan Museum of Anthropology at Beloit College, and Sara Pfannkuche, a PhD archaeology student at UW-Milwaukee, to help us accurately portray a prehistoric Native American hunter who would have lived in the Rock River valley. Based on local archaeological research, they provided us information for the life-sized hunter model right down to the type of clothing, weapons and body tattoos. Emma Kravig, a Beloit College senior design major, was contracted to design and make the hunter's deerskin clothing and accessories. Larry Kinsella of Collinsville, Illinois, a nationally known expert in flintknapping, reproduced an authentic (circa 5,000 BC) spear and atlatl (spear thrower). Beloit College students and faculty also helped us identify and date a collection of locally found Native American artifacts that were donated to the museum by Howard Fox. These artifacts are part of the display.



John Barnhart

Eric Triggstad

Trevor Hogan

Gary Gullett

Dr. Michael Jeffords

John Barnhart, Natural Resources Manager with the Oregon Park District, acquired and donated a vintage steel moldboard from an early 1900s plow for students to be able to touch and experience as part of the exhibit. He also helped restore some early agricultural equipment that will be on display in the new museum's Prairie and the Plow exhibit.

Byron High School agriculture teacher Eric Triggstad and some of his Future Farmers of America students were consulted to give their input regarding a custom made computer farm interactive exhibit feature that allows visitors to make environmental choices on how to best manage the land on parts of a demonstration farm.

Byron Forest Preserve District Board Commissioner Trevor Hogan used his drone to film several hours of our Restoration Department's controlled prairie burns to be used in a film to teach museum visitors about the role of fire in prairie preservation in the new immersive theater. Professional photographers, Gary Gullett of Photo Safari Network in Byron and Dr. Michael Jeffords of the Illinois Natural History Survey also provided free use of their photographs of local flowers, animals, and prairie landscapes for the immersive theater.

In June and July 2016, the 20-year-old museum exhibits were removed by our Maintenance Department and over 70 taxidermy animals were loaned out on a long-term basis to a dozen natural history museums and nature centers located throughout the northern Illinois region. The wall dividing the PrairieView banquet room and the museum was removed along with old light fixtures and carpeting. Two new windows were installed overlooking the prairie and the beloved "Wolf Den" tree was given a makeover and relocated to a new room that will serve as an immersive theater for visitors.

The new museum will have over 4,000 square feet of museum space along with glass doors that open up to a new 2,600-square-foot outdoor observation deck that will overlook 400+ acres of the Jarrett Prairie Nature Preserve. The museum's state-of-the-art exhibit designs will make better use of the building's high vaulted ceilings and the new look will be striking.

The Jarrett Prairie Center Museum will be the center of prairie education for area school children, a starting point for eco-tourism in the Rock River valley for out-of-town visitors, and a source of community pride for District residents for many years to come.

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