

MCWANE SCIENCE CENTER STRATEGIC PLAN

BACKGROUND. A merger between a children's museum and a natural history museum in 1991 created a new, interactive science center for Birmingham, AL. Opening in 1998 in a renovated former downtown department store, McWane Science Center's 250,000 sf² facility with an IMAX theater; interactive exhibits and extensive programs; community partnerships; and store, café and parking ramp represented a major presence, renewed activity and great aspirations for the downtown and greater Birmingham region. During its first six years of operation, McWane Science Center faced the challenges characteristic of any new museum or science center. Establishing a presence on the local educational and cultural scene; building awareness among audience and stakeholders; managing the operational realities of a complex facility; and transitioning from a capital to an operating budget tax even the most robust of new institutions. These challenges, however, were magnified by two factors. First, McWane Science Center was a pioneer in the very gradual process of downtown Birmingham's revitalization. Second the Science Center's facility, while a major asset, represented a large amount of space for a market of Birmingham's size to support. In 2004, McWane Science Center attracted more than 284,000 visitors and served 3,700 members with an operating budget of \$5.5 million. Even with these accomplishments, the Science Center needed to attract new visitors, strengthen its offerings, and further stabilize its financial base. With the arrival of a new President and CEO in June 2004, board leadership recognized the need - and opportunity - for planning that would advance McWane Science Center beyond its post-opening phase.

PROCESS. A strategic planning process, facilitated by museum planning consultants Jeanne W. Vergeront (Minneapolis, MN) and Andrea Fox Jensen (Litchfield, MN), began in January 2005. The process was guided by four challenges that were to identify:

- Who the McWane Center needs to serve.
- How the McWane Center can get real community traction.
- How the McWane Center can develop its facility to provide an even more compelling experience for visitors.
- How the McWane Center can continue to operate in the black.

The process actively engaged a staff and board planning team and other Science Center staff and board. A Strategic Backdrop, based on a review of organizational documents, interviews with internal and external stakeholders and an analysis of data on comparable science centers, summarized internal and external factors and led to a set of Conclusions and Implications clarifying the strategic issues McWane Science Center was likely to face over the next five years.

RESULTS. Through a comprehensive strategic planning process, McWane Science Center revisited and revised its mission and values to reflect the importance of serving young people, their families, and teachers, especially in the 12-county region. Three strategic goals and supporting objectives guide the Science Center in its commitment to being more intentional in delivering science learning and more deliberate in creating compelling experiences. Going forward, McWane Science Center will become increasingly accomplished at being a place that understands, brings together, and reflects the community.