

Testimony of Bernard Fishman  
Director of the Maine State Museum

L.D. 210

"An Act Making Unified Appropriations and Allocations from the  
General Fund and Other Funds..."

February 7, 2025 10:00 a.m.

Senator Rotundo and Representative Gattine of the Appropriations and Financial Affairs Committee, Senator Rafferty and Representative Murphy of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, and honorable committee members present for this joint meeting, I am Bernard Fishman, Director of the Maine State Museum, and I am here to summarize the museum's proposed budget for the coming biennium.

**Background**

As I reviewed earlier with the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, the museum finds itself in an exciting, dramatic, but challenging position, as the ongoing renovation of the Cultural Building in Augusta, where before 2020 the museum had its extensive exhibits and its offices, is at last reaching its completion. The Bureau of General Services, which has managed the project, tells us that the current and long-awaited final phases of this massive renovation are taking place now, and we may be able to move back into the building in April. It has been a long wait, since the museum has been closed to the on-site public for over four years.

Those four years have been among the most trying in the nearly 200-year history of the museum, and the most demanding since the 1980s, when the museum's original suite of exhibits was developed and installed. Because of the closure we lost our annual on-site audience of nearly 50,000, which included our school audience of 15,000. We had to move thousands of objects out of dismantled

exhibits and into distant storage locations, and spent over a million dollars of staff time to directly assist the renovation project, deconstructing exhibits, storing and protecting collection objects, endlessly re-arranging storage locations, participating in the monitoring and sometimes the correction of construction details, moving the staff into temporary offices, and creating a largely new work plan to support a series of comprehensive strategic and educational initiatives.

Of course, we continued to care for the 800,000 collection objects that we preserve for the people of Maine, and we sustained our programs of research, publication, collections development, making collection loans to institutions literally around the world, and responding to hundreds of public inquiries. But we also developed important new talents and projects. We learned how to design and deliver a variety of on-line educational programs, some in cooperation with other state agencies, that now reach some 3,000 students and teachers a year. We created a robust on-line identity that attracted an annual virtual visitation of 1.4 million users. We continued to schedule tours of the State House and the Blaine House that served 9,000 visitors annually. And, perhaps most dramatically, we developed 13,000 square feet of new exhibits for the museum, the museum's most extensive exhibit planning and design effort in over forty years. The museum raised over \$3 million in public and private funds to support the development of these new exhibits.

I must take a moment to thank the State of Maine for its generous support of the Cultural Building renovation and of the museum. You, our state legislators, the governor, and the managers of the Bureau of General Services, were essential allies in sustaining us and our work, and meeting the ever-rising costs of the renovation. I am grateful to our capable, devoted, and loyal staff members, who were suddenly and almost endlessly transformed out of their formal job descriptions into 24-hour-a-day emergency responders, building monitors, and construction engineers. And I am grateful to the public, which never forgot us, and expressed its continuing appreciation for the museum by ceaselessly asking 'When will the museum re-open?' and telling us 'We miss you, and our families miss you.'

Our new exhibits will give a brilliant new face to the museum and greatly increase our educational reach and capacity. Among the new installations will be the *Lunder Education Center*, our first purpose-built space for educational programs, designed to serve family groups and students in particular. It will offer natural history displays; science, technology, and communications presentations; a young learners' area; and an introduction to archaeology, with a state-of-the-art digital touch table, using materials from the archaeological excavation of the Revolutionary War brig *Defence*. Three other new exhibits will be installed. The one that will first greet visitors is *Beyond the Postcard: Stories of the Maine Experience*, which you see here in a view from the museum entrance (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1. View of *Beyond the Postcard: Stories of the Maine Experience* from the Maine State Museum's new front entrance.

Nearby, on the main floor, there will be a dramatic presentation spotlighting the story of humpback whales in the Gulf of Maine. This exhibition, *Vector: a Whale's Life in the Gulf of Maine*, will include the only display in the world featuring a paired humpback adult whale and calf of these sizes and ages. Here you see a view of the whale skeletons as they will look when installed (**Figure 2**).



**Figure 2.** *Vector: A Whale's Life in the Gulf of Maine* will show the 45-foot-long skeleton of a 35-year-old female humpback with the skeleton of a juvenile whale, which, at five to six months old, is the only one of this young age on display anywhere.

Another new exhibit, slated for the museum's 4<sup>th</sup> floor, will be *Maine Quilts: 250 Years of Comfort and Community*. I hope you will keep all of these new exhibits in mind as I discuss the details of the Maine State Museum's proposed budget for the upcoming biennium.

### **First Museum Budget Program: Maine State Museum 0180**

On page A-540 of L.D. 210, **Maine State Museum 0180**, is the baseline General Fund Budget for the museum's operations. Most of this budget is essentially the same as that in the last biennium and includes the modest, routine cost increases required by various state government departments which provide services to the museum. It includes Personal Services for the salaries and benefits of the museum's staff of 21 full-time equivalent positions. Under All Other are the museum's non-personnel General Fund costs, which cover a portion of the tools, equipment, and services enabling the staff members to perform their specialized functions. Here I'll mention that the museum normally raises a distinct portion of its total expenses from non-state government and other sources, an amount typically in the 10-15% range of its whole budget. At present it also includes a \$245,000 exhibit installation grant from the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services, something of at least modest ongoing concern to us in light of recent federal attempts to curtail grant awards. Being closed to on-site visitors has meant a continuing annual loss to the museum of up to \$150,000 in admissions income and store sales.

The museum's Special Revenue Funds under program 0180 include two accounts – the Museum Sales Program Revolving Fund and the Maine State Museum Endowment for Publishing. The All Other figures listed here in FY 26 and FY27 are the combined totals for these two small accounts and represent planned expenditures for the coming biennium.

### **Four General Fund Initiatives**

The General Fund initiatives for the museum in program 0180 total four, two of which were required in order to meet cost increases for services by other state agencies, and two of which are directly related to the re-opening of the museum. These are also on page A-540 of L.D. 210.

**Initiative 1: General Government Service Center:**

This is a **modest increase** required by the Dept. of Administrative and Financial Services to pay for financial and human resources services provided to the museum.

**Initiative 2: Technology:**

This *All Other* increase of \$15,828 in each year of the biennium represents cost increases for desktop and network technical services and licenses provided by the Office of Information Technology.

**Initiative 3: One Public Education staff position, Museum Technician III:**

The Maine State Museum is entirely about public education and conveying pride in, and understanding about, the heritage of Maine. As we approach the long-awaited museum re-opening, which will include a new, highly-developed educational facility and a group of exhibits with, at last, modern technology and interactive adjuncts, we need a single new education staff position to help manage these additions and the increased responsibilities they bring. For students, visiting the Maine State Museum is a vital activity that brings a common experience to half the K-12 students in our state and is fundamental in bringing to them a broad and accurate understanding of what makes Maine what it is. **This position will enable the museum to resume and advance its essential public educational programs within a set of dramatically new conditions, and also, for the first time in many years, allow the museum to open on Sundays,** an important public visitation day for families. The museum re-opening is a once-in-a-lifetime event, something singular and essential, and it needs to go forward with sufficient staff support to make the museum the success it must be.

**Initiative 4: One Limited-Period Museum Technician III Position for Exhibit Installation:**

It took months for the museum to move out of the Cultural Building because of the complexity of dismantling exhibits and moving large collections. We want to move back and re-open the museum by the spring of 2026, and we have only a single exhibit preparator on staff. **This requested temporary position will be**

**devoted to the construction and installation of the 13,000 square feet of new exhibits we have designed**, an enormous level of creative activity that will dwarf anything else we've done for forty years. This position will help ensure that we can meet our schedules and responsibilities without unconscionable additional delays. Over five years of closure will have preceded the re-opening, and we must push hard to restore public access to the museum within the next year.

### **Second Museum Budget Program: Operating Fund Z179**

The museum's budget categorizations have been handed down from remote antiquity and are not always easy to recognize as a single connected whole; yet they are. This program, shown on page A-541, and its single Special Revenue Fund, hold income from museum admissions. These amounts are essentially unchanged from the previous biennium, except for small, required, additions to cover the increased costs of personal services. The All Other allocation allows the museum to spend admissions income, when we re-open, on matters related to visitor use such as ticketing, data collection, scheduling, and special public events.

### **Third Museum Budget Program: Research & Collection-Museum 0174**

Within the category of Research & Collection, Museum 0174, are the Federal Expenditures Fund and Other Special Revenue Funds, which you will see on page A-542.

The Federal Expenditures Funds amount is unchanged from the previous biennium. It reflects an estimate of what federal grants might bring to the museum during the biennium.

We currently have one open federal grant.

The Other Special Revenue Funds account holds the funds we might raise through donations from individuals, businesses, foundations, and from competitively awarded non-federal grants for special projects. The amount is smaller than in the previous biennium because fundraising for the new exhibits has been largely completed.

I thank you for your attention to the museum's budget requests. Only the last two initiatives, for utterly vital staff positions, represent more than incidental additions to the museum's budget from the General Fund.

The Maine State Museum is one of the irreplaceable public institutions that help define Maine. The museum is Maine's Smithsonian, and Maine's most vibrant link to the lessons and knowledge of our past. We are about to return to thrilling public activity after more than four years of important but quiet work in an enforced condition of reduced public access to the resources we hold in trust for the people of Maine. Please support the requests that will return us to the public shaping of education and understanding about Maine's unique historical, cultural, and environmental legacies. In doing so you will help reveal to a new and eager generation what a treasure we have in the Maine State Museum.