



## Request for Proposals

### Assessment of Operations and Strategic Recommendations For the Future of The Belle Isle Aquarium and Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory

The Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) and the Belle Isle Conservancy (BIC) are beginning a collaborative planning effort to develop the potential of the Belle Isle Aquarium and the Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory as anchor attractions that will lay the groundwork for a future Cultural Campus in the island park of Belle Isle. The Aquarium and Conservatory are both currently open to the public and both in urgent need of repair and greater operational support. This RFP focuses upon this initial project as a first step towards the larger vision of developing the entire Cultural Campus.

The ideal consultant or consultant group will be able to provide guidance on the needs of professional aquarium and conservatory operations, to help MDNR/BIC plan immediate improvements that pave the way for a greater plan for the entire Cultural Campus in the future.

#### **Background and Context: Belle Isle and its Proposed Cultural Campus**

Belle Isle is a 987-acre island park in the Detroit River, formerly operated by the Detroit Recreation Department and now operated by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR), with support from the nonprofit Belle Isle Conservancy (BIC). Both organization are interested in developing comprehensive plans for an area known loosely as the Cultural Campuses: a collection of attractions located in a 50-acre area near the center of the Island. This RFP concerns only the Aquarium and Conservatory, but to provide context, the Cultural Campus attractions include:

- **Belle Isle Aquarium** – built 1904, it closed in 2005 and was re-opened in 2012 by the Belle Isle Conservancy, which now operates it. The Aquarium and the Conservatory were designed together and were originally connected by a stairway, which was removed in the mid-twentieth century to add a large tank to the Aquarium.
- **Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory and Gardens** – opened in 1904 and not renovated since the 1950s, it is a steel frame glass dome with two smaller domed pavilions, connected to the Aquarium by a glass barrel-vaulted hall. On the west side is a terraced formal garden, added in the 1920s. The Conservatory is operated by the MDNR, with support from BIC.
- **Greenhouses** – date from the early twentieth century, support City of Detroit landscaping.

- **Dossin Great Lakes Museum** – built 1959, operated by the Detroit Historical Society with exhibits of maritime history.
- **Insulruhe House, aka White House** – built c. 1860 with renovations in 1873, 1926 and 1984, a two-story wood-frame house is currently used for administrative offices.
- **The Stables** – built 1894, the clay tile roof of this large brick and half-timbered Tudor Revival building was restored by BIC in 2011-112. The Stables is currently used for maintenance support by the DNR, and not open to the public.
- **Sawmill and Century Barn**– built in 1895 and 1936 respectively, currently used for storage.
- **The Nancy Brown Carillon** – the 1939-1940 Nancy Brown Peace Carillon is a limestone Neo-Gothic Revival building with Art Deco influences, with an automated musical device that plays music on a regular schedule.
- **The Scott Fountain** built 1925, Belle Isle’s most beloved landmark. The feature includes a central white marble fountain surrounded by a terrace with a large lagoon to the west. The fountain pool was originally constructed with a floor of Pewabic Pottery tiles.
- **The Casino** – built 1907, this two-story Renaissance Revival building is used frequently for events.
- **Flynn Skating Pavilion**- built 1949, it is no longer used for skate rentals and concessions, and currently houses occasional events.
- **Bandshell** - built 1950 with a cantilevered rectangular canopy above the stage, with rehearsal space, restrooms and dressing rooms. Outdoor spectator seating is a paved area. Currently rarely used.

## **Current Situation**

### Belle Isle Aquarium and Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory

The Belle Isle Aquarium and Horticultural Building (1901-04) holds singular significance as an historic structure and a beloved cultural asset for the community. It faces several immediate challenges which, if addressed properly, can assure its viability as a public institution and attraction for years to come.

Aspects of the building that establish its unique historic character include its standing as the oldest purpose-built public aquarium building in North America, its likely being the last surviving aquarium/botanical conservatory combination from the Victorian era, and its stature as an early landmark by noted architect Albert Kahn. We are resolute in preserving this historical identity as we plan for a relevant and sustainable future.

The institution’s uniqueness provides an opportunity to think outside the box relative to current trends in aquarium exhibit design. We believe the architecture is a significant draw that relieves the pressure to outdo the “wow” factor of other institutions. The intimate appeal of the historic footprint counterweights the trend to bigger and newer facilities. Likewise, exhibit signage should not introduce visual or physical clutter to the space.

For much of its history, admission to the institution has been free or relatively low-cost, making it affordable for a wide public. While this was due to public support that the institution no longer enjoys, our desire is to develop a business plan that ensures both professional operations and maintains broad public accessibility.

### **Aquarium Operations and Recent Improvements**

Staffed by dedicated volunteers except for one contractor who monitors fish tanks with daily feedings. Open to the public Saturdays and Sundays. The Aquarium is operated by BIC, authorized by a memorandum of understanding with the City of Detroit. A collaboration with Wayne State University provides education programs, research activities that enhance the aquatic collection. Michigan State University donated equipment and supplies and provides graduate interns. Fish displays have grown significantly. For the past two years, the Aquarium roof and windows have been repaired with grants from the State Office of Historic Preservation that are matched by funding from BIC. BIC has made other repairs as well.

### **Anna Scripps Whitcomb Conservatory Operations**

Staffed by the MDNR, the Conservatory is open to the public Wednesday through Sunday 10 am – 5 pm. Its interior displays and outdoor formal garden are frequently used for weddings and other events. BIC supports plant pruning and buys supplies, and BIC volunteers conduct educational tours. An annual Garden Party fundraiser has supported improvements to steps and the restoration of statuary. The Conservatory's glass structure and building has not been modernized and needs major restoration and updating. Climate control systems are inadequate.

### **Critical Building Issues**

The two buildings share a common heating plant, and share electrical systems. Both are in poor condition, endangering the live collections in the two facilities. Currently, the MDNR is preparing a separate RFP for a design/build contract to repair the existing boilers and pipes to stabilize both buildings for the winter. However, future plans for these facilities should include a complete overhaul of the climate control systems to provide reliable environmental controls that meet modern standards for aquatic and floral collections and for visitor comfort.

The two facilities were originally connected by a stairway, which was replaced decades ago by a large fish tank. There is considerable interest in restoring the stairway, but this also has significant implications for both operations and climate control.

## **DELIVERABLES**

### **Purpose of the Assessment and Strategic Planning Project**

A strategic plan that addresses several areas of urgent need is necessary as we embark on a course for the future. Objectives to be met include:

#### 1. Evaluation of Immediate Needs

- **Evaluate current operations of the Aquarium and Conservatory and identify critical issues that must be addressed immediately** for management of each facility to meet professional standards and to serve the public well. What staffing is needed to accomplish this?
- **Work with stakeholders** (BIC staff, board and key volunteers: MDNR staff; City of Detroit officials; selected community stakeholders) **to identify possible future visions for both facilities, and to provide general estimates of the implications of various options for the cost of capital improvements and ongoing operations.** This information will enable the BIC board and MDNR leadership to make informed choices as they commit to a course of action. Specifically:
  - Clarify the goals of the institution's recreation, education and research missions. The report should provide options, as more than one approach may be possible.

- For each vision concept, describe how exhibits would be updated in a manner that retains the historic ambiance, while meeting modern standards of husbandry.

## 2. Longer Term Vision

- **To provide options and guidance for the evolving partnership of MDNR and BIC.** Should the original stairway and connection between the Aquarium and Conservatory be restored for a better visitor experience? How should MDNR and BIC collaborate to share responsibility for capital improvements and operations of these two facilities, and perhaps of the larger Cultural Campus as well?
- **To identify specific capital improvements, based upon the above, which will become the basis for campaigns to raise both private and public support in the future.** However, developing architectural drawing or a funding feasibility study is not expected in this initial assessment. The goal of this stage of planning is to develop an architectural concept that incorporates necessary structural repairs, historic restoration, physical plan improvements and historically sensitive new construction. Improvements must meet historic preservation criteria.

## 3. Business Plan

- Develop general estimates of the funding requirements to meet professional standards, over the next 3-5 years.
- Identify a realistic fundraising strategy for immediate capital improvements and operations, to show how revenues could be obtained to meet these goals. (For the purposes of this RFP, only a general concept for fundraising is required: estimates of earned revenue, potential for sponsorships and other sources of revenue.)

## QUALIFICATIONS

The successful bidder must assemble a team that demonstrates experience in these areas:

- Knowledge of professional practices and standards for aquariums and conservatories, and other cultural facilities
- Ability to work with a diverse stakeholder group, including paid staff and dedicated volunteers
- Knowledge of public/private partnership models
- Familiarity with live collections (aquatic and horticultural)
- Operations of cultural facilities
- Ability to provide cost estimates for realistic business planning

## SCOPE OF WORK

Topics to be covered include, but are not limited to:

- Interpretive plan/direction for live collections that these facilities can support well
- Suggestions for other displays, including interpretive signage and seasonal displays
- Building Improvements: repairs and restoration that preserve the historic integrity of the buildings
- Ongoing maintenance requirements
- Educational Programs – topics, audiences, methods of delivery (paid staff or volunteer)

- Grounds – the Lily Pond between the two buildings, the Conservatory garden, and other landscaping
- Division of responsibility between MDNR and BIC for staffing, operations and capital improvements
- Volunteer Engagement: appropriate projects and responsibilities, how to maximize and manage this effort in conjunction with other BIC and MDCR volunteer programs
- Relationships with the professional aquarium and conservatory communities: opportunities for expertise and key partnerships
- Sustainability issues: possible sources of private and public support

## **PROPOSED PROCESS**

The Consultant will work with a Steering Committee comprised of key representatives of MDNR and BIC, who will be the primary contacts and provide project oversight.

### 1. Preparation

- a) Become familiar with history of and existing reports/plans for the Aquarium and Conservatory, and the Cultural Campus model in the 2005 Master Plan for Belle Isle (which was never formally adopted, but serves as a good starting point).
- b) Meet with the Steering Committee to confirm project goals and process.

### 2. Assessment Survey – on-site visit to Detroit

- a) Observe Aquarium and Conservatory operations during closed and open hours.
- b) Meet with key staff and volunteers to discuss current operations, procedures and concerns.
- c) Meet with leadership of BIC and MDNR to discuss the aquarium and conservatory in the context of the larger effort to preserve, protect, improve and operate Belle Isle Park

### 3. Benchmark Best Practices

While extensive benchmarking is not required for this project, it would be helpful for the consultant firm to propose models and best practices elsewhere that could serve as a model for this work.

### 4. Preliminary Recommendations

- a) Recommendations for immediate improvements – what must be done for the safety of live collections, facilities improvements or management procedures that must be addressed immediately
- b) Consultant prepares 2-3 scenarios for each facility's future, such as:
  - Operated with a small core staff and extensive volunteer support
  - A mid-range vision, what could be done with better facilities or exhibits and more staff to develop exhibits and programs
  - The most ambitious scenario, including building improvements and a more ambitious interpretive vision and education programs
- c) For each scenario, the Consultant will prepare:
  - Statement of vision: goals for the live collections, for the visitor experience, and for educational activities
  - The types of collections, projects and programs that would be needed
  - Staffing requirements and a general annual cost estimate for operations

- Building improvements needed to support the vision
5. Stakeholder Meeting to Present Preliminary Recommendations – in Detroit
    - a) Submit preliminary recommendations to the Steering Committee, discuss findings via conference call or in-person meeting if possible. Plan the presentation to the larger stakeholder group.
    - b) Meet with a group of 10-25 persons (actual composition TBD in consultation with MDNR, BIC and the Consultant) to present the preliminary recommendations.
  6. Final Report
    - a) Make changes as needed and prepare an Executive Summary and the more detailed Final Report.

The goal is to accomplish the above work in six months.