

Chapter 30

Western Development Museum – Permanently Removing Historical Artifacts

1.0 MAIN POINTS

Determining which artifacts to remove from a museum collection and when is key to effectively maintaining and managing museum collections. Actively removing artifacts helps make preservation of artifacts manageable, relieves storage space pressures, and as such, helps control costs.

The Western Development Museum (WDM) is Saskatchewan's largest human history museum. WDM had, other than in the following areas, effective processes to permanently remove historical artifacts from its collections. WDM needs better guidance to help it systematically identify and select artifacts for removal. Use of the information in its collections database would aid it in these decisions. In addition, it needs to reinforce its expectations of staff to actively participate in identifying artifacts for removal.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Under *The Western Development Museum Act* (Act), WDM is responsible for collecting, preserving, restoring, and exhibiting objects of historical value and importance to Saskatchewan and for their disposal.¹ The Act gives WDM's Board of Directors the authority to manage its collections.

This chapter reports the results of our audit of the effectiveness of WDM's processes to permanently remove historical artifacts from its collections.

WDM is the largest human history museum in Saskatchewan with a collection of over 75,000 artifacts.² Since its creation in 1949,³ WDM has collected and displayed artifacts of artistic, cultural, historical, or scientific significance to the province. The majority of the artifacts are of historical value and importance connected with the economic and cultural development of western Canada. Now the museum focuses on collecting artifacts representative of Saskatchewan's human history from the beginning of the settlement period (circa 1870) to the present date.

WDM has four exhibit locations—Moose Jaw, North Battleford, Saskatoon, and Yorkton. Respectively, each location focuses on a different theme: transportation, agriculture, economy, and people. Each year, WDM has over 200,000 visitors to its four locations.⁴

WDM has a Cabinet-appointed board of directors and a staff of about 50 full-time employees including a Collections Curator who has primary responsibility for managing the collection.

¹ Sections 12 and 17 of *The Western Development Museum Act*.

² Western Development Museum, *2015-16 Annual Report*, (2016), p. 24.

³ www.wdm.ca/AboutUs/index.htm (4 July 2016).

⁴ Western Development Museum, *2015-16 Annual Report*, (2016), p. 6.



Government grants are its primary source of revenue.⁵ Over the last five years, it has received about \$4.1 million in grants from the Saskatchewan Ministry of Parks, Culture, and Sport each year.

In 2015-16, WDM spent almost one-third of its \$5.8 million revenue on its curatorial services⁶ including about \$167 thousand on exhibits and collections.⁷ At March 31, 2016, WDM had net financial assets of \$1.9 million (2015: \$2.1 million), and tangible capital assets (comprised primarily of buildings) with a net book value of \$6.4 million (2015: \$6.3 million).⁸

Although WDM collects with a view to permanency, it recognizes it may need to remove artifacts from its collections on occasion.⁹ It acknowledges its large collection and the continual growth in its collection places pressure on available storage space and that it is unlikely that it will secure additional storage space.¹⁰

A key part of managing collections is determining which artifacts to remove from a collection and when.¹¹ Not actively removing artifacts from its collections can create risks for future acquisitions.

Without effective processes for actively removing artifacts, WDM may face storage space pressures, unmanageable preservation or storage costs, and impair its ability to maintain its collections.

3.0 AUDIT OBJECTIVE, SCOPE, CRITERIA, AND CONCLUSION

The objective of this audit was to assess the effectiveness of the Western Development Museum's processes, for the period of January 1, 2014 to August 15, 2016, to permanently remove historical artifacts from its collections.

To conduct this audit, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook – Assurance*. To evaluate WDM's processes, we used criteria based on our related work, reviews of literature including reports of other auditors, and consultations with management. WDM's management agreed with the criteria (see **Figure 1**).

We examined WDM's documentation related to artifacts' removal processes (e.g., legislation, removal policies and procedures, selection criteria for removal). We compared WDM's policies and procedures to external guidelines and practices (e.g., *Canadian Museums Associations Ethics Guidelines*, Smithsonian Collection management policies). We also interviewed WDM's staff responsible for removal of artifacts. In addition, we sampled removed-artifact files to assess whether the removals followed established removal processes.

⁵ In 2015-16, provincial government and other grants made up 74% of WDM's total revenues (2014-15: 72%).

⁶ Curatorial services including education/extension, collections, conservation, exhibits, research, fundraising, marketing, and technical services.

⁷ Western Development Museum, *2015-16 Annual Report*, (2016), Audited financial statements, p. 37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁹ Western Development Museum, *Collection Management Policy*, p. 6.

¹⁰ WDM officials (July 2016).

¹¹ *Canadian Museums Association Ethics Guidelines*.

Figure 1—Audit Criteria

- 1. Set policies for removal of artifacts from its collections**
 - 1.1 Maintain clear written policies for removal of artifacts (e.g., aligned with relevant Guidelines, transparent, fair disposal)
 - 1.2 Establish criteria for removal of artifacts that align with mandate and acquisition policies (including authorization)
 - 1.3 Establish criteria to select preferable methods of disposal
 - 1.4 Communicate policies for removal of artifacts
- 2. Identify relevant artifacts for potential removal**
 - 2.1 Actively assess collections to identify potential artifacts for removal
 - 2.2 Establish artifact removal plans
 - 2.3 Obtain appropriate approval for removal plans
- 3. Remove artifacts in accordance with policies**
 - 3.1 Document removal method
 - 3.2 Prepare artifacts for removal
 - 3.3 Record removals appropriately (e.g., enter in system, timely, accurately)
 - 3.4 Dispose of artifacts (e.g., in accordance with method, timely)
 - 3.5 Use proceeds from removal of artifacts appropriately (e.g., in accordance with Guidelines)

We concluded that for the period of January 1, 2014 to August 15, 2016, the Western Development Museum had, except in the following areas, effective processes to permanently remove historical artifacts from its collections. The Western Development Museum needs to:

- › **Have explicit guidance on systematically identifying artifacts for removal from its collection**
- › **Use information in its collection database to analyze its collection to aid deaccessioning and disposal decisions**
- › **Conduct a systematic review of its collections to identify artifacts for removal**
- › **Reinforce expectations of staff to actively assist in identifying artifacts for removal**
- › **Dispose of deaccessioned artifacts within established timeframes**

In addition, it needs to comply with its policies and obtain Board approval of changes to its policies.

4.0 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, we describe our key findings and recommendations related to the audit criteria in **Figure 1**.



4.1 Policies Need to More Closely Align with External Guidelines and Practices

4.1.1 Collections Management Policy Maintained

Although museums collect artifacts with a view to permanency, occasions exist where artifacts need to be removed from a collection, for a variety of reasons (e.g., duplication in the collection). Permanently removing artifacts from a museum's collections involves two key steps: deaccessioning and disposal.

- › Deaccessioning is the process of removing artifacts from the museum's collections. Reasons for deaccessioning artifacts can include lack of relevance to the museum collections, artifact deterioration, inability to provide adequate artifact care, and insufficient or inadequate storage.
- › Disposal is the act of physically removing deaccessioned artifacts from the museum or storage and relocating them elsewhere. Disposal options include transfer to another museum, sale, or physical destruction of deteriorated artifacts.

The Western Development Act (Act) gives the WDM Board the authority to dispose of property it has acquired including its collections.

WDM maintains a *Collections Management Policy* (Policy). This Policy is based on *Canadian Museum Association Ethics Guidelines* (CMA Guidelines). This Policy sets out how WDM is to develop and use its collection to achieve its mandate.¹² It provides direction on the acquisition of artifacts, use of collections, loans of artifacts, and their deaccessioning. In addition, as shown in **Figure 2**, the Policy sets out criteria to assist staff in determining when to deaccession artifacts from the collection.

Figure 2—WDM Deaccessioning Criteria

- › Lack of relevance to the mandate, themes, and/or purposes of WDM
- › Badly deteriorated and/or damaged physical condition beyond WDM's ability to restore
- › Excessive duplication in the collection
- › Consideration of restrictions on use placed by the donor, if any^A
- › Inability of the WDM to provide adequate care
- › Physical hazard or health risk to the staff or public

Source: WDM *Collections Management Policy*.

^A Typically, WDM does not accept donations with restrictions or conditions attached to them.

The Policy also provides direction on other key areas such as documenting reasons for deaccessioning, expectations to keep artifacts in the public domain if possible (e.g., transferring the artifacts to another museum), conflict of interest requirements of staff, use of proceeds received from sale of artifacts, and required approvals to remove an artifact from the collection.

The Policy outlines allowable disposal methods, as shown in **Figure 3**. Allowable disposal methods include transfer, sale, or destruction. The Policy states that, where

¹² The intent of WDM's mandate is to procure tools, machinery, implements, engines, devices, and other goods and chattels of historical value and importance; to collect, arrange, catalogue, preserve, and exhibit to the public these tools; to stimulate interest in the history of the economic and cultural development of the province; and to co-operate with organizations having similar objects.

possible, WDM should first attempt to transfer deaccessioned items to another public trust either by gift or sale. The Policy requires the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) to approve the disposal method, and funds generated from sale of artifacts be used to add to the collection or repair artifacts.

Figure 3—Allowable WDM Disposal Methods

Allowable Disposal Method	Description of Method
Transfer	Transfer to non-profit public museums or organizations having similar objectives. (Preferred method of disposal)
Sale	Advertised public sale
Destruction	Destruction of item (Method is to be used when deaccessioned artifacts are badly damaged, for those artifacts with no monetary value and which cannot be placed through transfer or sale, or if they are dangerous to staff and/or the public)

Source: WDM *Collections Management Policy*.

WDM gives staff ready access to all WDM policies and procedures including the *Collections Management Policy* through its intranet (i.e., a share point site).

4.1.2 Board Approval of Changes to Policy Needed

WDM's Board policy makes the Board responsible for approving policies and revisions.¹³

WDM's *Collections Management Policy* requires the Collections Curator to review the Policy on a regular basis to keep it current.¹⁴

Although the Policy was dated March 2013, management indicated that it revised the Policy in the spring of 2016. We found WDM did not keep documentation of these revisions or approval thereof. Management indicated senior management had approved these revisions; management did not seek its Board's approval of these revisions.

Not seeking Board approval of policy revisions is contrary to WDM's Board policy.

Board approval of policies confirms Board members agree that policies align with the organization's mandate and appropriately mitigate risks to the organization. Lack of Board approval of the policies and revisions increases the risk that inappropriate decisions may be made.

- 1. We recommend that management follow established policies and seek approval of the Board of the Western Development Museum for revisions to policies.**

¹³ Western Development Museum, *Board Governance Policy*, (2016), p. 4.

¹⁴ Per WDM's *Collections Management Policy*, the Collections Curator is responsible for the day-to-day oversight of the *Collections Management Policy*. The Collections Curator is responsible for recommending potential artifacts for removal to the CEO and Board.



4.1.3 Written Guidance on a Few Key Areas Needed

In its *Strategic Plan (2011-2016)*, WDM has outlined its need to review and update its *Collections Management Policy*. It also identified a need to have a collections plan with criteria for collecting and refining its collections through grading and deaccessioning. At mid-August 2016, it had not yet developed such a collections plan.

When we compared the Policy's requirements for removing artifacts from WDM's collection to the CMA Guidelines and other best practices (e.g., *Smithsonian Institution Collections Management Directive 600*), we found the following. While the Policy aligned in most cases, it did not contain the following:

- › Systematically identify potential artifacts for deaccessioning and disposal—The *Smithsonian Institution Collections Management Directive 600* recommends periodic review, evaluation, deaccessioning, and disposal of existing collections to refine and improve the quality and relevance of the collections.

WDM identifies potential artifacts for disposal primarily when moving artifacts or developing exhibits, as opposed to on a systematic basis. While WDM uses a computer database to keep key information about each of its artifacts; it does not use current information about its collections from the database to initiate deaccessioning or disposal of artifacts.

A systematic deaccessioning review program helps manage space pressures, control costs, and keep collections relevant.

- › Requirements for periodic (e.g., annual) reporting on deaccessioning and disposals to the Board—The *Smithsonian Institution Collections Management Directive 600* recommends annual reporting to the Board of deaccessions and disposals during the reporting period.

Throughout the year, WDM management recommends to the Board artifacts to deaccession but they do not give the Board aggregated information on deaccessioning and disposal activities (e.g., number of disposals and method of disposal).

Guidance on periodic reporting on deaccessioning and disposals helps the Board oversee these activities.

- › Guidance on when staff should obtain independent appraisal of artifacts identified for disposal—The *Smithsonian Institution Collections Management Directive 600* recommends independent appraisals when estimated values of single collection items or group of collection items reach a pre-determined financial threshold (e.g., more than \$10,000 requires an independent appraisal or informed estimate of fair market value).

WDM management indicated it rarely disposes of artifacts of significant value to justify the costs of obtaining an independent appraisal.

Knowing when to obtain independent appraisals helps ensure fair value is received for items of significant value.

- › Public notification of disposal of artifacts—CMA Guidelines require museums to make public their intention of removal at least three months in advance of disposal. Public notice of dispositions shows transparency in collection management.

WDM does not, in practice, notify the public of its disposals of artifacts unless it disposes of them through a public auction.

Guidance on when to make public its intention to dispose of artifacts promotes transparency and reduces the risk of inappropriate disposal of artifacts.

2. We recommend that the Western Development Museum provide its staff with written guidance on:

- › **Systematically identifying artifacts for removal from its collection**
- › **Reporting aggregate artifact deaccessioning and disposal activities to the Board**
- › **When to obtain independent appraisals of artifacts**

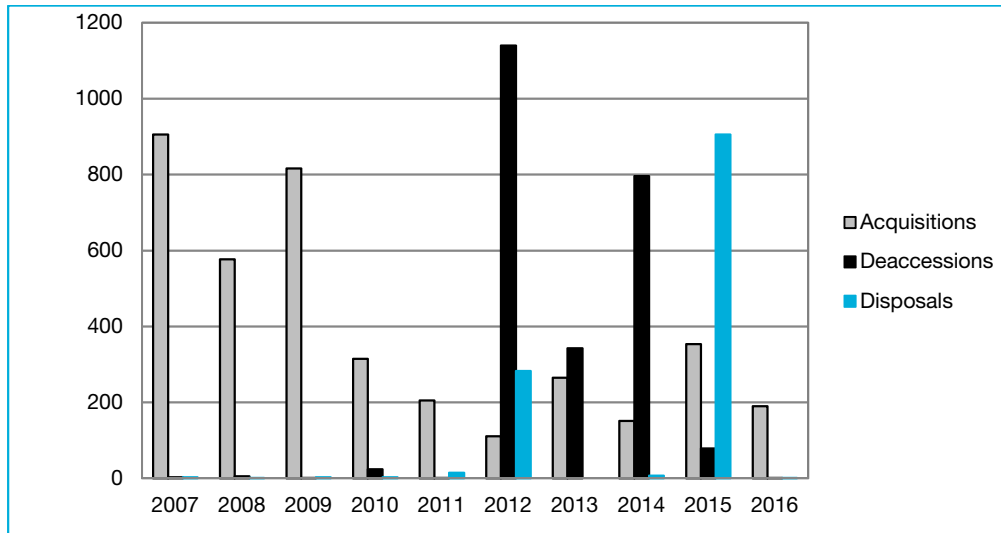
4.2 Meaningful Analysis of Collection Needed to Identify Potential Artifacts for Removal

4.2.1 Lack of Regular Review of Collections May Contribute to Storage Issues

WDM's *Strategic Plan (2016-2021)* (Plan) includes a strategy to establish and refine an efficient, repeatable process for the deaccessioning of specific collection types. WDM had started a deaccessioning pilot project to systematically reduce its 1920's car collection. The Plan states that the removal of cars will reduce storage pressures and establish a process that may be applied to other collections.

As previously noted in **Section 4.1.3**, we found WDM identified items for deaccessioning when it moved artifacts or developed exhibitions. Management indicated that it bases its decision to recommend deaccessioning on the significance, condition, and history of ownership (provenance) of an individual artifact.

Figure 4 shows, over the past 10 years, WDM acquired 3,890 artifacts, deaccessioned 2,394 artifacts, and disposed of 1,222 artifacts. Deaccessioned artifacts continue to require storage until they are disposed of.

**Figure 4—WDM Artifact Acquisitions, Deaccessions, and Disposals**

Source: Developed by Provincial Auditor's Office based on information provided by WDM management.

WDM's trend of acquiring more artifacts than it disposes of has increased the size of its collection and is contributing to the storage pressures WDM is facing.

WDM stores about 65% of its artifacts (i.e., about 48,000 artifacts) at its Curatorial Centre¹⁵ located in Saskatoon. In addition, WDM keeps many of its larger artifacts (e.g., wagons, plows) outside because of lack of available inside storage space. WDM officials note that given government-wide fiscal restraint, it is unlikely it will acquire sufficient additional resources to increase its existing storage space in the near term.

Outside storage can be a significant issue for artifact preservation as it can result in the deterioration of artifacts due to exposure to sunlight, heat, rain, and fluctuations in temperature. Lack of suitable or sufficient storage space increases the importance of systematically deaccessioning and disposing of artifacts.

Our review of artifacts listed in WDM's database identified numerous items with similar database descriptions (e.g., 239 gas tractors, 27 organs, 5 grand pianos). These similar database descriptions suggest these artifacts may potentially be duplicates. Deaccessioning best practice encourages museums with duplicate artifacts to consider whether the benefit of preserving duplicates outweighs the cost of preservation and storage.

Storing and caring for duplicate or similar artifacts without supporting analysis can waste scarce resources. Also, not having an active review process to evaluate the condition and relevance of artifacts increases the risks of having duplicate artifacts, deteriorating artifacts, and constant storage space pressures. An ongoing review of collections and active deaccessioning and disposal may help to refine and improve the collections to support WDM's mandate and reduce storage space pressures.

3. We recommend that the Western Development Museum systematically review its collections to identify potential artifacts for removal.

¹⁵ The Curatorial Centre co-ordinates programs for the four WDM branches and provides administration.

4.2.2 Expectations for Staff Consultation Need Reinforcement

WDM uses its Policy and job descriptions to assign responsibilities for artifact removal.

WDM assigns responsibility for the removal of artifacts primarily to the Collections Curator and expects other WDM staff to contribute to identifying artifacts for potential removal. For example, the Policy indicates that the Collections Curator may recommend artifacts for deaccessioning in consultation with relevant collections, research, conservation, exhibits, and education program staff. This would include staff who work at Museum locations and Curatorial Centre staff.

Our review of job descriptions for key positions with involvement in collections management activities found WDM had not finalized them (i.e., job description is still in draft) for many years. For example, the draft Collections Co-ordinator job description (which differs from the title of the current position) was last updated 30 years ago.

Although WDM's Policy expects involvement of many staff in deaccessioning, in practice, WDM museum technicians and managers indicated that they do not consider themselves responsible for identifying artifacts for potential removal. Rather, they considered this responsibility to rest solely with the Collections Curator. As such, they did not routinely suggest to the Curator artifacts that could be deaccessioned.

We also did not find evidence that the Collections Curator routinely consulted with staff at Museum locations to actively seek artifacts for deaccessioning. In addition, the Curator acknowledged she did not routinely visit Museum locations.

Staff at each Museum location have valuable and hands-on information on the condition of artifacts at their location. They are well-positioned to assist with identifying items for removal.

Reinforcing roles and responsibilities related to identifying artifacts for removal (e.g., through staff training and communications) would contribute to a consistent understanding of expectations and facilitate compliance with policy. Also, involvement of staff at Museum locations in deaccessioning would broaden the number of staff with knowledge about collections management and facilitate succession management.

4. We recommend that Western Development Museum *Collections Management Policy* clarify its expectations of staff to actively assist in identifying artifacts for removal.

5. We recommend that the Western Development Museum update job descriptions of staff involved in collections management to reinforce their roles and responsibilities in deaccessioning and disposing of artifacts.



4.3 Timely Disposals and Approvals Consistent with Policy Needed

As noted in **Section 4.1.1**, WDM defined criteria for the removal of artifacts and specified the allowable methods of disposal. As noted in **Figure 3**, the allowable disposal methods include transfer, sale, or destruction of artifact.

While WDM uses its database to query information about specific artifacts, it does not use it to generate reports to help it analyze its collection (e.g., identify deaccessioned but not disposed artifacts, identify possible duplicate artifacts, etc.). Use of such reports and analysis would contribute to a systematic review of its collections and inform decision making.

As noted in **Section 4.1.3**, WDM's policies should but do not include explicit guidance on systematically identifying potential artifacts for deaccessioning and disposing of them. As a result, it has not expected staff to establish when they planned to dispose of items (e.g., estimated date of disposal) or how timely it expected staff to dispose of artifacts approved for deaccessioning (e.g., within specified number of months from deaccessioning approval).

Based on a sample of artifact removals, we found:

- › Deaccessioned artifacts were supported by documented rationale
- › Rationale for decision to deaccession artifacts aligned with criteria outlined in the *Collections Management Policy*
- › Deaccessioned artifacts received Board approval prior to deaccessioning
- › Disposal methods applied aligned with allowable disposal methods in the *Collections Management Policy*
- › For artifacts transferred to another museum, WDM entered into artifact release form agreements with recipient museum
- › Deaccessions and disposals were properly recorded in the database system (e.g., the reasons for deaccessioning and disposal, Board approval, disposal method)

However, we found that artifacts approved as deaccessioned did not have a planned disposal date. For the artifact removals we examined, we found significant time lags between when the Board approved an artifact for deaccessioning and when the WDM disposed of the artifact. In our sample of 30 artifacts, 88% of the artifacts approved for deaccession in June 2014 were not disposed of at July 2016—25 months later.

Not tracking and disposing of artifacts within a reasonable timeframe results in storage space being needlessly occupied by artifacts approved as no longer part of the Museum's collections. It may also result in artifacts being restored inappropriately to the main collection. WDM should set and follow expectations for timely disposal of deaccessioned artifacts.

6. We recommend that the Western Development Museum use information in its collection database to analyze its collection to aid deaccessioning and disposal decisions.

7. We recommend that the Western Development Museum dispose of deaccessioned artifacts within an established timeframe.

In addition, we did not find evidence of the CEO's approval of any of WDM's disposals for the items we sampled as Policy expects. Management indicated the CEO was aware of artifacts disposed from January 2014 to August 2016 but acknowledged it did not have evidence of the CEO's awareness or approval.

Keeping support of required approvals enables staff to show awareness and compliance with policies. Not obtaining required approvals of artifact disposals increases the risk of staff using inappropriate artifact disposal methods.

8. We recommend that the Western Development Museum approve disposals of artifacts consistent with its *Collections Management Policy*.

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