

Chapter 48

Western Development Museum – Removing Historical Artifacts Permanently

1.0 MAIN POINTS

By August 2018, the Western Development Museum had implemented four of the eight recommendations made in our 2016 audit of its process to permanently remove historical artifacts. It partially implemented three and did not implement one of the recommendations.

The Museum's Board of Directors had revised its delegation of authority to permit the Chief Executive Officer to approve changes to operational policies. The Museum had updated curatorial staff job descriptions to clarify expectations for the identification of potential artifacts for deaccessioning and disposal.¹ It used its database to run reports to analyze its collections. Management disposed of deaccessioned artifacts that were no longer significant to the Museum's collection and annually reported disposals to its Board.

The Museum continues to work on updating its *Collections Management Policy* to set out:

- Expectations for staff to actively identify artifacts for removal
- Guidance to staff about artifact removal
- Expectations for timely disposals
- A systematic review of its collections to identify artifacts to remove

Having strong processes for determining which artifacts to remove from a museum collection and when is the key to effectively maintaining and managing museum collections. Reviewing collections and removing artifacts helps the preservation of artifacts, relieves storage pressures and helps control costs.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

The Western Development Museum is responsible for collecting, preserving, restoring, and exhibiting objects of historical value and importance to Saskatchewan and for their disposal under *The Western Development Museum Act*.²

The Act gives a Cabinet-appointed Board of Directors authority to manage the Museum's collection. It has a collection of over 75,000 artifacts making it the largest human history museum in Saskatchewan.³

¹ Deaccessioning is the process of removing an artifact from a museum collection prior to disposing.

² Sections 12 and 17 of the *Western Development Museum Act*.

³ Western Development Museum, *2016-2017 Annual Report*, p. 20.



Since its creation in 1949, the Museum has collected and displayed artifacts of artistic, cultural, historical or scientific significance to the province.⁴ 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 present.

The Museum has four exhibit locations—Moose Jaw, North Battleford, Saskatoon, and Yorkton. Respectively, each location focuses on a different theme: transportation, agriculture, economy, and people. It has a staff of about 50 full-time employees including a Curator and a Collections Manager who have primary responsibility for managing the collection. Each year, the Museum has over 200,000 visitors to its four locations.⁵ Permanent removal of artifacts helps maintain the relevance of the collections while managing costs and storage space.

2.2 Audit Focus

This chapter describes our follow-up of management’s actions on the recommendations we made in our 2016 audit about the Museum’s processes to permanently remove historical artifacts from its collections.

In our *2016 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 30, we concluded that the Museum had, except in the area of our eight recommendations, effective processes to permanently remove historical artifacts from its collections.

To conduct this audit engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook – Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Museum’s progress towards meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. Management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

During our follow-up audit, we interviewed Museum staff to discuss key actions that management has taken since our 2016 audit to implement the outstanding recommendations. We reviewed supporting documentation, communications, and policies to obtain an understanding of these actions. We also tested a sample of 30 artifact disposals made during the audit period.

3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This section sets out each recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation, the status of the recommendation at August 31, 2018, and the Museum’s actions up to that date.

⁴ <https://wdm.ca/AboutUs/index.htm#operations> (8 August 2018).

⁵ Western Development Museum, *2016-2017 Annual Report*, (2017), p. 8.

3.1 Policy Approval Process Followed

We recommended that management follow established policies and seek approval of the Board of the Western Development Museum for revisions to policies. (2016 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 21, 2017)

Status – Implemented

The Museum implemented changes to its policy approval process.

In June 2017, the Board approved changes to its Governance Policy to authorize its Chief Executive Officer to approve operational policies.

We found that management informs the Board of any changes to policies at each Board meeting. The Museum is following its policy for the approval of revisions to its operational policies.

3.2 Written Guidance and Expectations for Staff Involvement in Artifact Removal Not Finalized

We recommended that the Western Development Museum provide its staff with written guidance on:

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

(2016 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 21, 2017)

Status – Partially Implemented

We recommended that the Western Development Museum Collections Management Policy clarify its expectations of staff to actively assist in identifying artifacts for removal. (2016 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 21, 2017)

Status – Not Implemented

At August 2018, the Museum developed a tool (a worksheet) to help staff assess the condition of artifacts and help them identify artifacts to remove from its collection, but it had not yet finalized revisions to its *Collections Management Policy*. The Museum expects to do so by the spring of 2019.

In the fall of 2017, management developed the deaccessioning and disposal worksheet to improve the consistency of documentation for the disposal of artifacts, and to guide staff in assessing the condition of artifacts. This worksheet requires the Chief Executive Officer to approve, in writing, any items recommended for disposal. The Museum implemented the worksheet in December 2017.



We found the worksheet outlines criteria to enable making consistent assessments of the condition of artifacts, and sets out recommended actions based on assessed condition of the artifact (e.g., repair, dispose).

Management expected a revised *Collections Management Policy* would include guidance about identifying artifacts for removal, when to obtain an independent appraisal of artifacts, and the role of staff in actively identifying artifacts for removal from its collections.

It did not expect to develop written guidance on reporting to the Board. Instead it started a new reporting practice. Starting in 2017, the Museum management annually gave its Board a report of the artifacts deaccessioned and disposed of during the year.

We found the report included sufficient information to enable monitoring of the removal of artifacts from the collection. For example, the report included a comparison of the number of artifacts disposed over the past three years.

Guidance for a systematic and consistent process to identify artifacts for removal from museum collections helps manage space pressures and control costs. Clear direction for when to obtain independent appraisals would help ensure appropriate evaluation and assessment of the artifacts occur.

3.3 Disposal of Artifacts Appropriately Approved

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

(2016 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 21, 2017)

Status – Implemented

Since the December 2017 use of the deaccessioning and disposal worksheet, the Museum has appropriately approved the artifacts recommended for disposal.

For the artifacts disposals made since December 2017, we tested 30 disposals and found that staff consistently completed the worksheets, and the Chief Executive Officer appropriately approved each of them.

3.4 Job Descriptions of Curatorial Staff Updated

We recommended 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. (2016 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 21, 2017)

Status – Implemented

The Museum updated the job descriptions of all curatorial staff to provide further clarification for roles and responsibilities in deaccessioning and disposing of artifacts.

During 2017-18, we found that the Museum updated the job descriptions of its curatorial staff to include responsibilities over the maintenance of the artifact collections. We found that all curatorial job descriptions clearly set out roles for staff in the process to identify artifacts for deaccessioning and disposal (e.g., monitor collection, prepare artifact condition assessments and recommendations).

Reinforcing roles and responsibilities related to identifying artifacts for removal creates a consistent understanding of expectations and reduces the risk of inconsistent assessments of artifacts. Also, involving staff at museum locations increases the knowledge about collections in assessing and deaccessioning.

3.5 Analysis of Collections Needed to Identify Potential Artifacts for Removal

We recommended that the Western Development Museum systematically review its collections to identify potential artifacts for removal. (2016 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 21, 2017)

Status – Partially Implemented

At August 2018, the Museum had not developed a written strategy to do systematic reviews of its collection to identify artifacts for removal.

During 2017-18, the Museum was reviewing a few collections (i.e., pre-1930s automobiles, piano rolls) to identify artifacts for disposal. The Museum also had preliminary plans to review its agricultural equipment and piano collections. It expected to do these reviews over multiple years given the large quantity of items in these collections. At August 2018, it had paused its reviews until it completes revisions to its *Collections Management Policy*.

Management indicated that it expects revisions to its *Collection Management Policy* would include guidance on how it will conduct reviews of its collections to identify and remove artifacts, and when to obtain independent appraisals of artifacts.

Lacking a robust and documented collections review process may result in many duplicate and deteriorated artifacts in the collections. This increases costs and results in storage space being used to house artifacts that should be disposed.

3.6 Expectations for Timely Disposals Needed

We recommended that the Western Development Museum dispose of deaccessioned artifacts within an established timeframe. (2016 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 21, 2017)

Status – Partially Implemented

At August 2018, the Museum does not have an expectation for what defines a timely disposal (i.e., expectation for timeframe between deaccessioning and disposal). The Museum plans to set out timeframes for the disposal of artifacts in a revised *Collections Management Policy* which is not complete.



Management has indicated that these expectations will likely vary depending on the nature of the artifact (i.e., larger valuable artifacts that go through public auction are expected to have a longer timeframe than those tossed in the garbage).

During 2017-18, the Museum disposed of 703 artifacts through donations, public auction, or destruction (i.e., garbage disposal). These artifacts consisted of items that were deaccessioned in prior years (i.e., prior to 2017-18) as well as items deaccessioned in the current year.

For 30 disposals of deaccessioned artifacts we tested, the Museum consistently documented the rationale for the disposal of each deaccessioned artifact.

The lack of a timeframe to dispose of artifacts increases the risk that unnecessary artifacts take up valuable storage space at the Museum's facilities.

3.7 Database Information Used to Assess Collections

We recommended that the Western Development Museum use information in its collection database to analyze its collection to aid deaccessioning and disposal decisions. (2016 Report – Volume 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement March 21, 2017)

Status – Implemented

The Museum used information from its artifact database to help assess its collection.

At August 2018, management was using the database to identify artifacts of a similar nature (e.g., Indigenous artifacts, pianos, pre-1930s automobiles, etc.) to help decide which review projects to initiate for potential deaccessioning. We saw examples of management using various reports produced from the database. For example, it used reports based on location (e.g., different museum locations, rooms at curatorial centre) to further assess its collection.

While management did not have a formal timeframe to produce and review reports, we found management was knowledgeable about the nature and extent of information in the database about its collection, how the database works, and how to generate reports with information useful in helping it manage artifacts in its collections.