

The EcoTarium's shared vision

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PHOTO | BRAD KANE

Lucy Hale & Paul Belsito, President & Chairman of the board EcoTarium, Worcester

In June, Paul Belsito took over as chairman of Worcester museum EcoTarium, where he led the search committee to find a replacement for former President Joe Cox. The museum ended up hiring Lucy Hale, who was the director of Trinity River Audubon Center in Dallas. She started on Aug. 20.

What were you looking for in a president?

Paul: We were looking for someone to lead us to our 200th anniversary. We needed someone who could fine-tune our vision and understand the trajectory of the museum. This institution is positioned really well, and we had applicants from all over the world. People saw the enormous possibilities we had here.

Lucy rose to the top.

Why did Lucy rise to the top?

Paul: We are a very unique organization in that we are part zoo, part science museum and part children's museum. Lucy had experience in all three. She really laid out a solid vision for the organization. It didn't hurt she already knew the area and was a Red Sox fan.

Lucy, why did you apply?

Lucy: It was a combination of things. The organization here is very well positioned, is beloved in the community and has a wonderful board. My parents live in Medford, so we were thinking about moving back up here. My mentor at the museum in Texas worked for a previous iteration of the EcoTarium, so I already knew about this place.

What is your vision for the museum?

Lucy: We need to rethink our space and use it as best as we can. Do we need to move the main gate, so it is easier to get in this place? Should we expand the animal experience? Do we need to do more in the early childhood area?

We are working to understand the community more, too. We need to physically get out more, out of our own gates. We need to be present where people are, such as having a presence at events in the parks.

We need to engage with the youth of our city to build the next generation of museum professionals. I'm a product of a museum volunteer program.

Paul, what does the board envision?

Paul: You really need to look at the possibilities here and make changes. The board is open to that journey. We want to be accessible to as many people as possible, but you have to do it in a creative way.

How is funding coming for that vision?

Lucy: We have an annual budget of about \$4 million, and about half of that comes from fundraising.

Paul: Our endowment is now \$11 million, which is helpful in executing any vision. Any organization with an endowment is blessed.

Lucy: The just-completed phase two of the capital campaign for the 200th anniversary was \$9.1 million, and the main addition was Wild Cat Station exhibit, which is opening this spring.

Phase three of that 2025 plan doesn't have a dollar amount. We are still figuring out exactly what we want to do, such as if we want to redo the stairs to make the museum more accessible for people with disabilities.

Our short-term goal is opening Wild Cat Station this spring. We want to make a big splash with that and have a big celebration. After that, we'll start planning for the 200th anniversary and phase three. Those plans need to start very soon.

Paul: But before we go that, we want to open Wild Cat Station. That is a mental milestone before we can move on.

When will the animals arrive?

Lucy: Construction should be complete on Wild Cat Station before Thanksgiving, and we should have the mountain lions sometime before Christmas.

We've reached out to the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife. Unfortunately, because they've had so many wildfires out West, they are finding a lot of abandoned cubs, or kittens, really. The ones too young to be released back into the wild are sent to places like us with the capabilities to take care of them.

They've reached out to us twice already about placing cubs with us, but construction wasn't complete yet.

And then phase three?

Lucy: The focus used to be on opening one new exhibit every year, but we need to take a step back and understand more what will drive people to the museum.

The EcoTarium board is amazing and has been really supportive of everything I want to do. So, thank you, Paul.

Paul: You're welcome.

This interview was conducted and edited for length and clarity by WBJ Editor Brad Kane.