The EcoTarrium's shared vision

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Lucy & Paul Belisto, President & Chairman of the board EcoTarrium, Worcester

PHOTO | BRAD KANE

In June, Paul Belisto took over as chairman of Worcester museum EcoTarrium, where he led the search committee to find a replacement for former President Joe Cox. The museum ended up hiring Lucy Hee, 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 time-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 that 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 EcoTarrium, 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 the 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. 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 our capital campaign for the 200th anniversary was $6.1 million, and the main edition 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 redecorate the museum 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 cats, or kittens, really. The ones too young to be released back into the wild are sent to places like us with the permissions to take care of them.

They've reached out to us twice already about placing cats 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 EcoTarrium board is amazing and has been really supportive of everything I want to do. So, thank you, Paul.

Paul: You're welcome.

The interview was conducted and edited for length and clarity by WSU Editor Brad Kane.

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