



INTERPRETIVE PLAN

2024

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

EXHIBIT
AK

INTRODUCTION

The Sheldon Jackson Museum (SJ) is presented with an enormous challenge and opportunity. The museum facility is at capacity for the safety of the collection, staff, and visitors. There are building needs to be addressed in order to serve the mission of the museum. The exhibits are due for updating and reenvisioning. SJ Museum will incorporate feedback from local Sitkans, cruise ship visitors, museum professionals, and invite more Alaska Native voices into the updated exhibits. The museum will pay special attention to: boarding school history, and its association with missionary and General Agent of Education for Alaska, Rev. Dr. Sheldon Jackson; and the work of the museum through the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which largely happens behind the scenes. This information needs to be represented in exhibit updates to educate the public.

In October of 2023, a booth at the Alaska Federation of Natives Convention in Anchorage

was rented by the Friends of SJM who also paid for travel expenses for staff to participate. Jackie Fernandez-Hamberg, Curator of Collections at the SJ Museum and Dr. Amy Phillips-Chan, Division Director of the Alaska State Library, Archives and Museum, attended with Sarah Asper-Smith of ExhibitAK. The goal was to solicit feedback about the museum as it is now, and how it should evolve in the future. Visitors were given postcards with information and a link to an online version of the survey. Additionally visitors were informed of SJ Museum's artist in residence program, traveling education objects, and how to access the collection online.

In person and virtual meetings occurred in Sitka in March of 2024. Sitkans were made aware of the meetings through social media, local radio, the newspaper, and personal invitation. Out-of-town participants were invited through an Alaska museum listserv and through personal invitation. Both meetings were open to the public. The

purpose of those meetings was to determine what stakeholders want to see addressed as we rethink the exhibits and future of the Sheldon Jackson Museum.

In June 2024, seven members of the Museum Sovereignty group, Alaska Native citizens invested in museums in Alaska, traveled to Sitka to meet with ExhibitAK and SJ Museum to share their concerns and hopes for the museum. After taking a closer view of the exhibits, we met and listened to their impressions and suggestions.

This document highlights aspects of the planning that will be considered in developing an expansion. In the meantime, there are steps to take to update exhibits that can be done in the short term, while funds are being raised for SJ Museum growth.

Addison Field
Chief Curator
Alaska State Museums

Date

Amy Phillips-Chan, PhD
Director
Division of Libraries, Archives and Museums

Date

ABOUT THE MUSEUM

The Rev. Dr. Sheldon Jackson was the moving force behind the construction of the Sheldon Jackson Museum and the collector of many of its objects.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum is the oldest museum in Alaska and is located in the first concrete building in the state. Construction began in 1895 and it has been occupied since 1897. The building was placed on the National Historical Register in 1972.

Curator Jackie Fernandez-Hamberg writes:

Sheldon Jackson was a Presbyterian missionary, founder of missions, boarding schools, and churches, collector, fundraiser, and publisher of religious newspapers. He was Superintendent of Missions to the Presbytery and General Agent of Education in Alaska and used his positions within the federal government and church to establish assimilative boarding schools in Alaska, and collect, and introduce reindeer to the territory. A controversial figure, he has been condemned and condoned for his impact on the history of Alaska, and particularly Alaska Native peoples, but he has also been called a man of his time whose philosophy was typical and representative of widespread American 19th century values, ideals, social mores, and ideas about “science and progress.” Regardless of one’s opinion of Jackson, his work had great implications for the history of Alaska.

The complicated history and differing views on Sheldon Jackson’s legacy have made the name of the museum a divisive point for some in Alaska.

CHALLENGES

- This is an ambitious project.
- The SJ Museum has a small staff, and the other Alaska State Museum is in Juneau.
- It takes years to bring this kind of project to fruition: 10 years is a conservative guess from start to finish.
- The SJ Museum is limited by physical constraints: there is no room to grow or change with the current facility. However, the State owns a large parcel of land that includes 8,000 square feet to the north that is well suited to the construction of additional facilities, in addition to various parking easements that are currently not utilized.

OPPORTUNITIES

- The staff is devoted and talented.
- There are many resources in Alaska that the SJ Museum can use and people who are excited to help with the project.
- Reimagining the space and exhibits provides opportunities to work with artists and Indigenous Alaskans who are invested in the museum.
- Because of the content of the museum, the popularity of the Native Artist Residency program, and the connections staff have made, it will make finding support for the project easier.
- The people of Sitka will be excited about the new expansion, as SJM is a beloved institution both locally and statewide.

THE DISCUSSION

Community feedback from meetings, statewide surveys, and visitor feedback informed the following:

Things that need improvement:

- In a survey that reached 68 people, 71% responded were in favor of having the name changed from Sheldon Jackson Museum.
- Native Artist Residency needs dedicated space; a temporary exhibit space would allow for Native Artist Residency participants to have exhibits and to explore other temporary shows
- Potential for an app to tell deeper stories about objects without adding too much text to the exhibit, also could incorporate Indigenous names and terminology, personal commentary, historic photos, stories and video. For example, show how belongings are used, like dancers at Cama-i festival
- If space were available, the museum could collect more contemporary work and exhibit it alongside older pieces
- The collection is accessible to anyone wanting to research, but more people need to know this
- Visitors could learn about the cultural use programs
- More staff may be needed to allow for museum expansion
- Better technology would allow museum to better serve larger Alaska community who can't visit Sitka
- The museum is about Alaska Native peoples and cultures. With time and funding the museum can tell those stories with Native people and with the pieces that they have

“I do think the name is currently holding the museum back from being all it could be. For many in the state, I think the name is directly in conflict with the job many of us in museums hope to be doing, which is the perpetuation and preservation of culture. Knowing more about the man and his motivations certainly helps one not feel so negatively, however many are not able to see past the damage done by boarding schools and his role in that phenomenon...”

— [survey respondent]

“I personally think that [changing the name of the museum is] hiding our past under the rug, and would rather not change the name, but I see that others may have other valid opinions and wouldn't argue strongly against a name change if it were clear that the change would bring healing and growth. “

— [survey respondent]

THE DISCUSSION

Community feedback from meetings, statewide surveys, and visitor feedback informed the following:

Things people like about the museum:

- Native Artist Residency program is immensely popular with museum visitors, artists, and culture bearers across Alaska, provides an opportunity for artists to share their work, do research in the collections, and visit their ancestors
- Educational loan program supports teachers borrowing hands-on objects from the educational collection to share in classrooms all over the state
- Considered to be one of the most comprehensive collections of Alaska Native belongings in existence
- The exploratory nature of the exhibits: drawers that open, items displayed overhead, and comparative displays of like items
- Museum appeals to many ages
- SJ Museum frequently asks for public input, and shows a willingness to grow and change
- The Friends of Sheldon Jackson Museum is part of Sites of Conscience, in collaboration with the local Sitka tribe
- Strong partnership with teachers and students at Mt. Edgecumbe school, which has students from all over the state
- Interactive elements are popular with children and adults
- Staff are welcoming, helpful, knowledgeable and kind

“This collection is full of amazing cultural and artistic heritage.”

— [meeting attendee, March 2024]

“The Native artist residency is huge [for the museum]! It’s an exemplary program that has evolved with the times.”

— [meeting attendee, March 2024]

“[I like where you show] demonstrating the creative process in creating an object. Perhaps you could make room for the spiritual process as well.”

— [meeting attendee, March 2024]

THE BUILDING

Physical space is the biggest challenge facing the museum

Building needs: COLLECTIONS

- **Increased space for collections storage**
Because the space is full, SJ Museum can't accept donations, increase contemporary collections, or remove/switch out items, etc.
- **Exhibit space**
Main gallery is at capacity. Lighting is inadequate, cases need to be replaced; current mounts and plinths need to be updated, mannequins are unnatural and may not be the best for the objects.
- **Temporary exhibit space**
Additional space would provide opportunities for Native Artist Residency, traveling exhibits, or featured items from the collection.

SPACE

- **Dedicated programming space**
Programs are currently held in the lobby, which is an awkward space next to flushing toilets and with limited AV, which is necessary for presenting lectures online.

- **Dedicated workspace for artists visiting through Native Artist Residency**
Need a space for artists that allows for gallery display of art; a place to work with good lighting, sound dampening; welcoming visitors; privacy for visiting with ancestors' work.
- **Staff offices**
Staff have limited space, making private conversations impossible, problematic when meeting with donors or talking about sensitive issues.
- **Workshop**
Dedicated space for working on exhibits and photography; currently gallery must close to make any exhibit changes, and there is inadequate space for photographing large pieces
- **Storage space**
Need space for library, archival supplies, hands on loan collection, object freezer, records and documents.
- **Research space**
- **Museum Shop**
This could be a vending machine or online sales to limit the space needed for a full store
- **Hands-on collections storage**
Inadequate at present

The Sheldon Jackson Museum needs to expand to allow for the safety of the collection, to meet the needs of a growing visitorship, and to continue to further the mission of the institution.

VISITORS

- **Larger entrance** to prevent bottlenecks on cruise ship days
- **Wayfinding**
- **Increased rest room capacity**

FACILITY

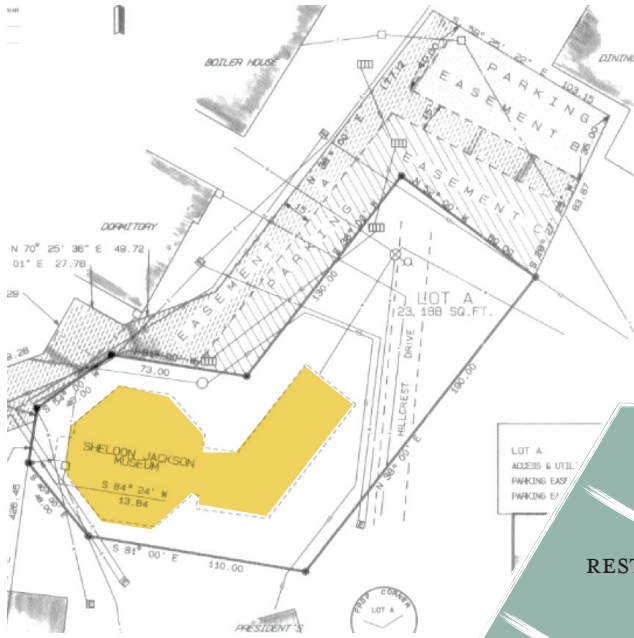
- **HVAC system**
- **Seismic evaluation of concrete structure**
- Effects of greatly increased visitor numbers on the museum
- Adequate parking for cars and bus traffic

In the short term (1–3 years):

- **Name change**
The name of the museum is problematic; while SJ Museum is not a museum about boarding school history, it is important to find a place to discuss this history and legacy in the building.
- **Signage**
Replace exterior signage, which is dated. Create templates for SJ Museum staff to make temporary signs, purchase sign holders for events and information.
- **Facility planning**
Hire a professional museum design firm to assist staff in pre-development planning to prepare conceptual design alternatives and cost estimates for museum expansion.

CURRENT FLOOR PLAN

As seen on the survey plat, there is sufficient land currently available for museum expansion

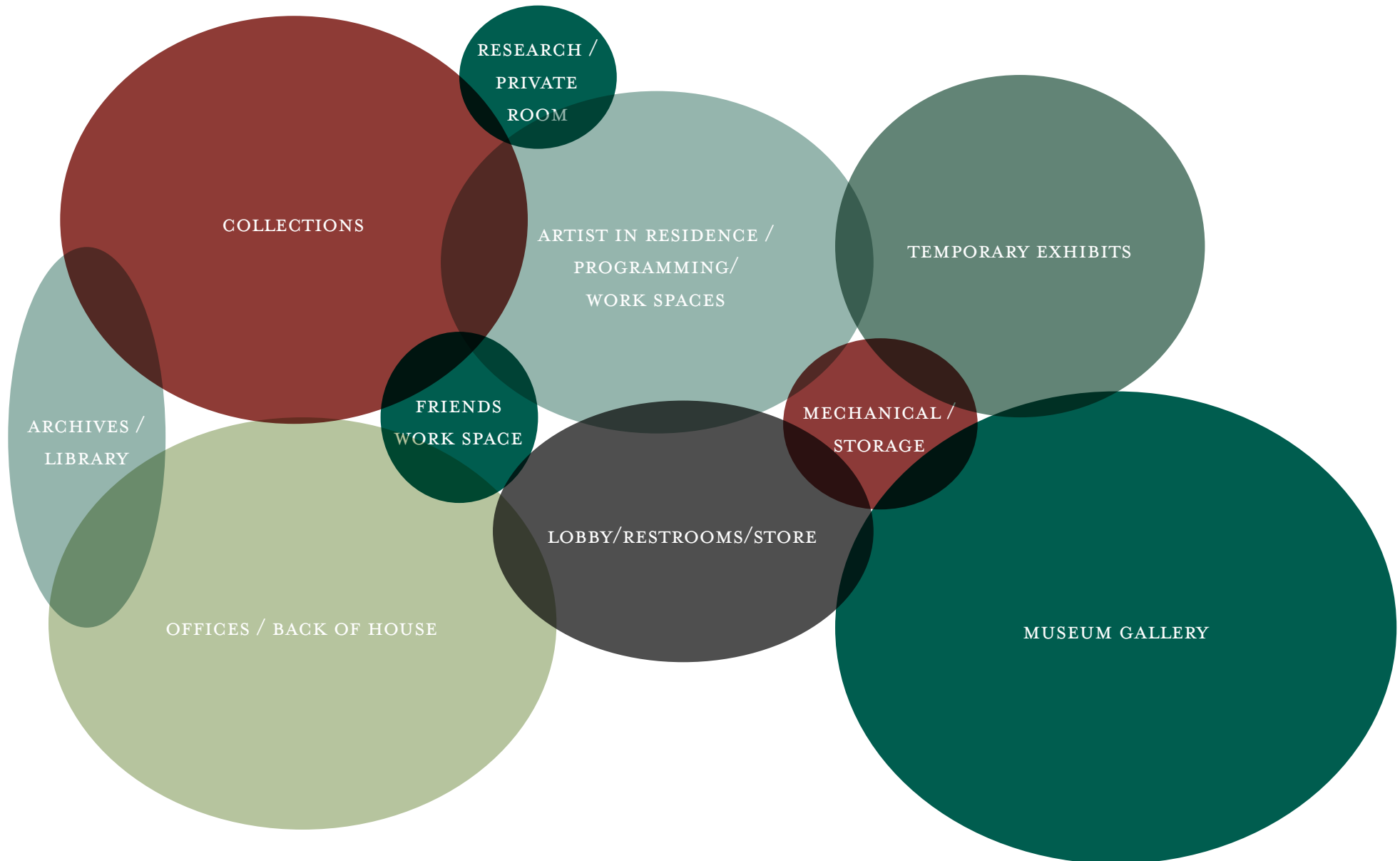


Current building shown in yellow. Actual property of museum shown in white



SPATIAL BUBBLE DIAGRAM

This rough spacial diagram represent amounts of space needed for museum operations, and is a useful tool in showing the public current constraints, but a professional museum design firm will assist staff in spacial planning in next steps.



INTRODUCTORY EXHIBIT

The Alaska State Museums is a state educational agency comprised of the Alaska State Museum and the Sheldon Jackson Museum that seeks to identify, collect, care for, and exhibit Alaska's material culture and natural history and provide public access to services and collections of the Museums. The Alaska State Museums interpret and disseminate knowledge about the history of the state, its people, and its resources. The Museums assist and advise in the professional growth and development of other museums and cultural centers within Alaska.

BIG IDEA

Cultures of Alaska are alive and well and strong, and complex and varied.

MISSION

The museum's welcoming exhibit, curated in partnership with Indigenous Alaskans, will explain to visitors that they stand on Sheet'ká K̄wáan territory in Lingít Aaní. The exhibit will provide contemporary context to the diversity and breadth of Alaska Native life, as shown by the works of ancestors, and current pieces by artists in Native Artist Residency.

GOALS & OBJECTIVES

Sheldon Jackson Museum will

- indigenize the curation process by including Alaska Native curators and others in the exhibit planning, design, and research
- use the present tense when discussing Alaska Native cultures
- prioritize transparency in exhibits: when in doubt about the provenance of a piece, tell visitors that we don't know where something came from, otherwise they might think it's being kept from them
- continue to be transparent about the process of exhibit planning, development, and design, keeping the public informed along the way and listening to feedback

Visitors to Sheldon Jackson Museum will

- recognize that Alaska is big and diverse cultures inhabit it
- learn about Alaska's cultures from first person quotations and photographs in exhibit labels
- see native cultures as living and adaptable
- make the connection between the usage of a tool and materials used and the land where it was made and the purpose of its use
- know how to find out more about what was on display at the museum, or what the museum does behind-the-scenes
- be able to look at a map of Alaska and understand how many different cultures live in this expansive state, and how different their homes might be

AUDIENCE

Sheldon Jackson Museum serves local populations and school groups, cruise ship visitors and other travelers, and Alaska Native artists and culture bearers.

- Reaching each of these distinct groups with learning materials tailored to each group's knowledge level is difficult. And although cruise ship visitors make up the majority of the counted visits, local Sitkans and Alaska Natives are lifelong users of the museum. Visitors to Sitka have increased dramatically, rising quickly every year since 2022. Buses of tourists are brought to SJ Museum daily in the summer, stressing the building and workers.

VISITOR TAKEAWAYS

“This collection is full of amazing cultural and artistic heritage.”

These are the ideas visitors will leave with after visiting the Sheldon Jackson Museum.

“You can tell a lot about people’s traditions, climate, landscape and technology from these belongings.”

“I didn’t realize Alaska Native communities were so unique from one another.”

“That was a difficult story to read about, but I’m glad I did.”

“This was made by my ancestor.”

EXHIBIT THEMES

Currently:

While the labels don't reflect it in every area, staff interpret the collection to visitors using the themes of

- connection to land and environment
- technological brilliance
- adaptation and living well
- how big and different Alaska is
- art (aesthetics)

The collection also reflects changing times. Pieces are largely from the 19th century and many pieces show European, EuroAmerican, and/or cross-cultural influence

Potential themes for remimagined exhibits:

Public input will be solicited on themes to highlight, but some of the themes we heard are

continuity of culture

- recognition of living, Indigenous communities
- contemporary examples of continuing culture and language

acknowledgement of trauma and resilience

- contextualizing Sheldon Jackson from an Alaska Native perspective

creation and connection to land

- continue to and improve upon showing process; how things are made, from what materials and for what purpose; connection to climate and landscape

connection to ancestors

- how we care for our belongings
- how we live with these objects

THE EXHIBITS

Many updates to the exhibits should be considered while upgrading the physical space with a major renovation. However, some changes can happen sooner.

Long term goals:

ALASKA NATIVE CURATORS

Because the collections come from Native Alaska, a reimagining of the exhibits will be guided by these cultural groups who will contribute to the telling of stories and what to display and will consult with their communities to make these decisions.

THE MUSEUM SPACE

While the design of the museum will happen later in the process, it is important to note differing viewpoints on the current layout. We heard from respondents that they appreciate the historical feel, the many pieces on display, and the drawers of storage—there is a nostalgic feel to the building. Others felt the museum came across as stuffy and there was a heavy sadness that accompanied seeing ancestors' objects displayed in this way. Sometimes both of these conflicting viewpoints existed in the same respondent. Future designs will want to cultivate a balance that reenvision the exhibits as alive and contemporary.

REFRESH CONTENT

In the short term:

Indigenous experts/artists will be hired to work with the SJ Museum's Curator of Collections and Alaska State Museum's Curator of Exhibitions to curate an introductory exhibit to replace the current lobby exhibit about Sheldon Jackson. Potential themes may include

- explanation to visitors that we are on Lingít Aaní, the land of Sheet'ká Kwáan.
- highlight contemporary Alaska Native artists
- highlight contemporary Alaska Native culture

Consult with Alaska Native culture bearers on the belongings that may not be suitable for display. Solutions will take into account limited storage space, but could include removal, signage, or covering with a cloth.

Ongoing maintenance: continue to tackle items from SJ Museum assessment 2017 (paint touch ups, admission desk, plinths and mounts, etc.); HVAC replacement (2025)

Continue to find places for temporary exhibits, such as the wall in the lobby or the artifact of the month case, which could highlight new work from the Native Artist Residency participants, or other pieces acquired for the collection.

Long term goals:

Because the collection has been largely stagnant, an opportunity exists to bring contemporary pieces into the gallery, and make the connection that Alaska Native cultures are alive and thriving

Make a storage facility for precious clan objects. Many important objects are held by individuals who would appreciate assistance properly preserving or storing these irreplaceable objects that are used for ceremonies and other purposes.

TRANSPARENCY

Make plans to explore the following in re-imagined exhibits: NAGPRA and how the museum complies with requests, Sheldon Jackson and boarding school legacy

ACCESSING COLLECTIONS

In the short term:

Some exhibit labels can be updated. New labels to address:

- removal or use of term Eskimo to describe Iñupiaq/Yup'ik culture
- removal of the term Aleut to describe Unanga and Sugpiaq cultures
- explanation of self-identifiers
- description of the ceremonial use program

Inside the museum, (perhaps to the right of the door), take space to address the legacy of boarding school history and Sheldon Jackson's role in acquiring objects. Discuss why we don't know where things came from (poor records, no known provenance,) and how Jackson came to have and donate these pieces to the museum.

In places where a NAGPRA consideration has been made, add a label to explain the process (ex. mortuary pole that is no longer in the museum collection but is being cared for by the museum as it awaits a decision from the true owner).

THE EXHIBITS

Long term goals:

The number of items on display is remarkable to visitors who want to know more about the works. Suggestions for adding this content without overwhelming them with text are an app, touchscreen, or QR code that allows visitors to learn more about the objects. This could include

- photos
- video
- oral histories
- object names and description in the language of origin

Museums are sometimes thought of as gatekeepers of information, which can erode trust with stakeholders. Museums are tasked with making their collections more accessible to the public. One way for SJ Museum to increase the trust between themselves and visitors is creating transparent communication about what the museum knows about each piece. The current labels often don't include a lot information, and many respondents believe there is more information that is not being shared. However, in large part, there is not a lot of information about many of the objects in the collection, and SJ Museum can be clear about that in future labeling.

Visitors want to know

- Where did this piece come from?
- Who made it? What cultural group are they from?
- How is it used? How does this practice continue today?

Language of origin will be incorporated into labels. When known, maker will also be shown on labels.

In the short term:

- **Kiosk**

A computer kiosk in the lobby could allow visitors to access the information that is publicly available on the Argus database.

- **QR Codes**

Directing visitors to a deeper dive into collections or an oral history about a specific piece in the museum could be done with QR codes.

IDEA SAVER

Things that might not go into the interpretive plan, but a space to remember other ideas.

Suggestions:

- **Catalog**
Develop an updated catalog for the SJ Museum collection
- **Alaskan Indigenous Collections Care Guide**
SJ Museum has the connections with Alaskan artists and culture bearers to collaborate on a care guide that could serve museums all over the state
- **Coffee Table Book**
Consider adding a coffee table book about the museum.

METHODS

The following methods were used to reach Alaskans, visitors, and others interested in the future of SJ Museum.

All of the funding for the Interpretive Plan development was provided by The CIRI Foundation (TCF), Cook Inlet Region, Inc., an Alaska Native corporation, and the Friends of Sheldon Jackson Museum.

- **Developed a website for information and feedback**
Established by exhibitak.com/SJM to provide ongoing updates of interpretive plan development, links to meetings, and a first draft PDF of the plan for feedback once it was written
- **Attended the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) conference in October, 2023, which attracts close to 5000 people from around Alaska**
Purchased a booth and talked to visitors about Sheldon Jackson Museum, educational loan program, Native Artist Residency program, and shared a digital walkthrough of the exhibits, photos of the space for those who hadn't visited, and shared the survey or gave visitors a postcard with a QR code that linked to the survey on a website.
- **Other feedback**
Assessed data from previous discussions that museum had undertaken: visitor surveys, which reach many out-of-town visitors in the summer; coffee talks, which provide a forum for locals to respond to questions about their hopes for the museum.
- **Meetings**
Held hybrid in-person/zoom meetings to reach invested stakeholders. In March 2024, held two meetings, one in the day and one in the evening, to try to get as many participants as possible. Offered snacks in person, and advertised via Facebook, Instagram, newspaper, flyer, and radio. Held a second round of hybrid in-person/zoom meetings in October 2024, after giving public a chance to read the interpretive plan draft and provide feedback. These meetings were attended by approximately 25 online and in person in March, and 10 online and in person in October.
- **Surveys**
Handed out a survey at AFN, or gave visitors a postcard with a QR code to the link to respond digitally. Surveys were also requested from Museums Alaska and Alaska Library listservs, social media for ExhibitAK and the Friends of Sheldon Jackson Museum. The Alaska State Museum also advertised the survey on their website. Participants were entered in a drawing to win a pair of earrings or two exhibit catalogs. Received 68 responses. (See attached).