

Niles Historical Society Strategic 5 Year Plan

Feb 28, 2020

1. Introduction

This Strategic Plan was developed by the active membership, officers, and Board of Trustees for the Niles Historical Society (NHS), sometimes referred to as the Society, a non-profit corporation organized under the laws of the State of Ohio.

2. Niles Historical Society Mission

The strategic plan for Niles Historical Society aims to further the following organizational mission:

- To encourage the preservation and promotion of the history of the Niles, Ohio area;
- To collect, preserve, and exhibit for public education and enjoyment, books, records, pictures, papers, and artifacts relating to Niles area history;
- To develop, preserve, maintain and operate as an historical museum and repository for historical materials, the Ward- Thomas house at 503 Brown Street, Niles, Ohio, in cooperation with, and as agent of, the City of Niles, Ohio.

3. Niles Historical Society Vision

Over the next five years, the society will become a vibrant and visible community organization and will strive to attract and serve residents of all ages. Its exhibits, collections and programs will be designed to attract visitors from Niles, the Mahoning Valley, and across the state and will raise the self-image of the city. We will work to attract new volunteers and encourage them to explore their program ideas in order to broaden and bring freshness to the Historical Society's offerings.

4. Current Status

4.1 NHS Facilities

The facilities of the society consist of the Ward-Thomas House, built in 1862 by James Ward and later purchased by John and Margaret Thomas. After the last member of the Thomas family passed away, the property was left to the City of Niles and later provided to the Niles Historical Society to develop a museum to showcase Niles and local area history.

The fourteen room house is located on five acres that are landscaped and maintained by the Society. Also included on the property are a recently restored barn, a carriage house (known as the Westenfield Room), and a 1925 restored greenhouse attached to a secondary building that serves as a workspace for the greenhouse.

The grounds include various gardens and 56 varieties of trees in the arboretum. Care of the house and gardens is done by volunteers.

Although the property and facilities above are the home of the Niles Historical Society, they remain the property of the City of Niles. The Society's current contract with the City of Niles runs until 2025.

4.2 Society Strengths

- Ward-Thomas House and associated facilities
- Large membership – primary financing comes from membership dues
- The museum collection consisting of over 5000 items. These include furniture owned by the Thomas family. These allow the house to be furnished in the style of the period. Throughout

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the museum, mannequins wear life size replicas of the White House First Ladies gowns displayed at the Smithsonian in Washington D.C.

- Heritage Day is celebrated on the society grounds every August. This brings visitors in to tour not only the Ward-Thomas House but also the extensive grounds.
- Historical presentations are continuing to be developed and presented to the community either by the society alone or in conjunction with the McKinley House.
- Several books have been written by society members and are available for sale year around.

4.3 Society Weaknesses

- Limited active membership – Although we have a large donating membership, there are only 12 to 15 active members. These are the people who take care of the house, the greenhouse, and the grounds. They also act as docents when the house is open for tours, develop and give presentations for the community, and maintain the collection. They are also the group that will be implementing this strategic plan.
- Static displays – the items and gowns displayed throughout the Ward-Thomas are rarely changed. This does not bring repeat visitors.
- Split ownership – The house and property are owned by the city. Although the city provides the society utilities, very few city officials are even aware that they own the property. This affects making repairs and dealing with agencies that provide grants.
- The environment in the Westenfield Room is not conducive to storage of delicate artifacts or for giving presentations to the community.
- Outside lighting at night is insufficient to support evening activities.

4.4 Society Opportunities

- Refurbish the House and Westenfield Room
- Refurbish the Barn
- Improve the paths and gate to provide access between the Society grounds and the parking lot at the Niles Middle School.
- Develop presentations for the community to be held on the property
- Work with local organizations to expand the ethnic diversity of the Society and develop presentations and displays focused on the ethnic history of Niles
- Expand the Westenfield Room to provide additional storage and a presentation area
 - Improve organization and storage of the collection

4.5 Society Threats

- Limited active membership
- Conflicts between members
- The membership overall has limited understanding of the collections
 - What is available
 - Where it is located
 - Some items are not well tagged
- Environment in the Westenfield Room – the Westenfield room is musty with limited humidity control. This is not a good environment for the material stored there.
- Barn foundation is not stable limiting its use
- Some old trees on the grounds are becoming unsafe and may need removal
- Slate sidewalks at the entrance to the house can become slippery in bad weather putting visitors at risk of slipping

5. Marketing Strategy and Target Audience

Current marketing includes

- Web site with pictures and articles.
- Newsletter
- Newspaper coverage
- TV PSAs
- Social Media
- Yearly calendar
- Annual Banquet
- Heritage Day
- Partnerships with other local and state organizations
 - McKinley Memorial Museum
 - McKinley Birthplace Museum & Research Center
 - Trumbull County Tourism Bureau
 - Other local historical societies
- Displays at the Trumbull County Fair
- Offsite events such as presentations at local schools or displays at other sites

Target customers include:

- Niles residents
- Area school children
- Trumbull County residents
- Mahoning County residents
- Local Historical Societies
- State Residents

6. Strategic Plan Goals

Goal 1: Upgrade the house, the Westenfield Room (Carriage House) and other parts of the property. This includes:

- *Have a full inspection done of the House, Westenfield Room, Barn, and Greenhouse to identify safety issues and required repairs*
- *Repair & Refurbish the Ward-Thomas House and replace damaged items*
 - Update wiring, as required, in the house
 - Remove wallpaper in the front hall and restore the wall murals
 - Replace carpeting in the upstairs rooms, as required
 - Replace carpeting in the Library
- *Repair & Refurbish the Carriage House (Westenfield Room) and replace damaged items*
 - Update wiring, as required, in the Westenfield Room
 - Remove mold in the Westenfield Room
 - Upgrade the environmental conditions in the Westenfield Room
 - Replace damaged carpeting in the Westenfield Room
- *Refurbish the Greenhouse*
 - Update wiring, as required, in the greenhouse.
- *Refurbish the Barn*
 - Update wiring, as required, in the barn.
 - Repair foundation
- *Refurbish the Grounds*
 - Update wiring, as required, in gazebo.
 - Evaluate the condition of plantings, remove dangerous trees, replace dead trees & bushes
 - Restore patio area and add iron tables and chairs; add benches to grounds & gazebo
 - Add educational signs beneath trees and bushes and plantings
 - Develop brochures for the grounds and gardens

Goal 2: Cultivate a vibrant sense of place and history in the local community and engage people of all ages in the historical process as a way to understand our world by being an advocate for history education.

- Increase the visibility and awareness of the NHS across the valley
 - Develop cooperative relationships with local history organizations across the valley in order to expand awareness of and access to historical resources
 - Develop programs, exhibits, and services based on local history
 - Develop presentations on various aspects of local history
 - Develop a simple logo for advertising purposes
- Develop compelling, relevant content that expands the public's knowledge of the diverse people that make up the population and history of Niles.
 - Form partnerships with ethnic and social organizations and assist them with documenting and sharing their history with broader audiences
 - Reach out to, engage, and develop collections-based programming and services specific to communities of interest

- Develop an inclusive, structured process for working with target audiences to identify and evaluate relevant stories
 - Structure collecting strategies and activities around these stories
- Work with (non-history oriented) community organizations, local government agencies, and schools to highlight and make relevant state and local history resources
 - Focus programs and services on skill development and storytelling
 - Align all school and children's programming to academic standards
- Develop a location within the Ward-Thomas house or Westenfield Room for temporary displays on special topics that can be used to draw people back to the house for repeat visits.
 - Structure collecting strategies and activities around these stories

Goal 3: Grow society resources

- Develop staff proficiency and cross training
- Grow revenue through diversified channels that will include: grants, donations from foundations,
- Hold craft & educational workshops for adults and children
- Expand the active membership
- Attend local society meetings

7. Planning

7.1 Planning Approach

This section addresses the overall plan for the identified goals. This plan will be submitted to the Trustees and officers for approval. On an annual basis, the top-level plan will be reviewed by the Officers against the status of the various tasks and will be updated as required. Such updates will be submitted to the Trustees for approval.

Once the top-level plan is approved the first projects will be identified. A Task Manager will be identified for each of these projects. This Task Manager will recruit helpers and develop a detailed action plan for that task and submit that plan for approval by the Trustees and Officers.

Action Plans – These are used for major project and budget planning. Action Plans drill down further into details of what needs to be done to complete the project and are helpful tools for the board to review. A good action plan identifies the strategic goal addressed, solutions, action steps, deadlines, responsible parties, costs, schedule of when money will need to be available, and outcome measurements. The strategic plan will only include a template of an Action Plan. Each time a new project is launched, an Action Plan will be developed for that project.

The Task Manager will report progress against the Action Plan Semi-annually to the Trustees and Officers. These progress reports will be submitted by March 15 and Sept 15. The reports will include both schedule status and cost status and will flag any issues that need resolution or assistance.

7.2 Top Level Plan

Since many of the later goals depend on having the house, Westenfield Room, and barn available, the first step has to be repairing anything that is deficient in these buildings. Note: since the Greenhouse was

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recently upgraded, it has lower priority in having additional upgrades. Safety issues we are aware of include: probable wiring problems in the Ward-Thomas house, the Westenfield room, and the barn; mold in the Westenfield Room; and foundation problems in the barn and lighting in the parking area. In addition, in the grounds there are some dangerous or dead trees. These safety issues must be addressed first.

Once the safety issues are complete, we will move on to refurbishing the aging and damaged items in the buildings such as ripped carpeting, damaged blinds, damaged curtains, and wall treatments. In the grounds, we will add wiring to the gazebo, repair the patio and add furniture to the patio so that it can be used for functions. These upgrades of the buildings and grounds will be a long-term project.

Not all of our goals depend on the building refurbishments, so some can be started in parallel. For example, we are already developing ties with other organizations across the valley (Goal 2) and are developing are giving presentations on topics of local interest (Goal 2). The continuation of these efforts will have high priority. Under Goal 3, cross training our staff and investigating new revenue sources are also potential near term activities that do not depend on the status of the buildings and grounds.

7.3 Top Level Schedule: see next page

This Top Level Schedule defines the projected timing of the basic goals. It will be updated with progress quarterly, reviewed annually, and modified, as required, based on unforeseen events that we cannot control (such as grant funding slipping out).