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THE MAKING OF AN INNOVATIVE MASTER PLAN

Transforming The Maritime Aquarium

NORWALK, CT (October 17, 2007)—Transforming The Maritime Aquarium from a beloved place for family fun and informal science education into one of the finest family destinations and a national innovator among aquariums and centers of conservation—while maintaining the elements held dear by the students and families that currently visit—is by no means a simple process. But the three years of work and planning that went into the creation of the Aquarium’s innovative new master plan have resulted in a document that lays out not only an expanded footprint for the Aquarium building but also the foundation of an even more successful and dynamic institution.

The transformation of The Maritime Aquarium began when Jennifer Herring, formerly Senior Vice President for Development and Membership at the Wildlife Conservation Society, joined the Aquarium as its new President and CEO. She quickly launched the process of “appreciative inquiry” (AI), recruiting more than 600 people from the Aquarium’s membership, visitors, staff, volunteer corps, trustees and other community stakeholders in this organizational development exercise. Under the direction of world-famous AI consultant Jane Watkins, the search began for examples of what the Aquarium and other institutions like it did best to provide a meaningful visitor experience and how that success could become the base for an even brighter future. From this process—as well as consumer research fielded in the local market—came the core values of making connections with a variety of animals from Long Island Sound and beyond, providing quality educational experiences for both visitors and students, being a voice for environmental conservation, and other key ideas that would inform the new mission and vision statement. The strategic plan that flowed from this new mission became the framework for the master plan.

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With a strategic plan in hand, a Long Range Planning Committee comprised of Maritime Aquarium trustees and senior staff began an international search for a design firm to lead the development of a master plan for the physical and interpretive development of the Aquarium. The committee visited zoos and aquariums across the country to see firsthand the work of the top candidates. And they were most impressed with the innovative and inspiring spaces created by Thinc Design, the firm that was later selected, along with Local Projects, to design the exhibits for the National September 11 Memorial Museum at the World Trade Center.

The Maritime Aquarium began working with Thinc in October 2006 to turn the transformational vision and principles of the strategic plan into reality. By December, a preliminary report assessing aspirations and opportunities was presented to The Maritime Aquarium's Board of Trustees. Throughout the first half of 2007 the designers developed a plan for spaces and interpretation that was revised and polished by staff from every department in the Aquarium until the finished master plan emerged in July.

Throughout the master planning process, numerous consultants worked with Aquarium staff to bring various aspects of the plan to life. Most notably, Paxton Barnes, along with a science advisory committee featuring Yale University's Dr. Stephen Kellert, developed the interpretive framework for the stories to be told and themes to be explored in the exhibits and other physical spaces of the transformed Maritime Aquarium. Former Monterey Bay Aquarium chief animal curator Dave Powell was the principal consultant for the development of new and renovated animal exhibits. Other team members with specialties in engineering, sustainability, visitor flow, life support and horticulture were engaged by Thinc Design for their help with elements of the plan.

The transformation of The Maritime Aquarium will be dramatic when the first of three phases is completed in five to six years. The transformation of the minds of the Aquarium's curious visitors will continue well into the future. For more information on The Maritime Aquarium's master plan, call the Aquarium at 203-852-0700 or visit. www.maritimeaquarium.org.

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