

Executive Summary: Context Report for the State Capitol History Gateway

Introduction

The first step in the process of developing an Interpretive Plan for the State Capitol History Gateway focused on identifying the interpretive program goals and key messages that would drive the remainder of the process. Those goals and messages, derived directly from the Purpose, Core Values, Mission and Goals for the Gateway that were established in the Strategic Plan, have been approved.

The next step focused on developing the Context Report. The report is not the plan for communicating those messages, rather it is a description and analysis of the context within which the Interpretive Network must function. Context includes:

- The audiences that must be reached with the messages in order to achieve the goals;
- The parameters (constraints) under which the network must be developed, such as money and under which it must function, such as acoustics in the rotunda;
- The opportunities to use physical features as starting points for telling the stories that will help communicate the key messages.

This document contains the approved goals and associated messages, and a summary of the context - key audiences , parameters (constraints) and opportunities that will inform the selection and design of interpretive and wayfinding opportunities for visitors.

Goals and Associated Messages

The following goals and associated messages were derived directly from the Strategic Plan. They will be used to guide the selection and development of all interpretive opportunities.

Primary Interpretive Goal

Increase participation in Oregon's democracy

Associated Primary Messages:

Communicating the following messages will help achieve the primary goal:

Message 1. The quality of my life has been and continues to be shaped by what happens in Oregon's government.

Message 2. It is people [like me] that make a difference by shaping history in ways that make a difference in the quality of life we [I] enjoy.

Message 3. It is easy to get involved in Oregon's democracy.

Secondary Interpretive Goal:

Increase interest in Oregon's history, and especially in the history of government

Secondary Messages:

Communicating the following messages will help achieve the secondary goal:

Message 4: Oregon has long been a fertile ground for ideas and innovation, resulting in groundbreaking achievements that affect people within and outside the state.

Message 5: It is important and of value for you [me] to know Oregon's history.

Message 6: You can discover stories of the past by 'reading' it in the world around you.

Key Audiences

The visitors to the Capitol can be roughly divided into the following major groups:

- **Oregonians** coming as independent travelers
- **Students** on school field trips
- **Legislature-oriented visitors** who are coming to participate in the democratic process taking place in the building
- **Out-of-state visitors** coming as independent travelers.

Each of those groups can be further divided into segments based on a variety of characteristics, such as physical capability, interests, level of knowledge and understanding, and learning styles, but for the purposes of this plan most of what will be relevant to the planning process can be identified by focusing on the general characteristics of each of these groups.

Given the mission of the History Gateway, which is to increase participation in Oregon's democracy, Oregonians coming to visit and students on school field trips are the primary target visitor groups for the interpretive network. Although the Strategic Plan identifies adult Oregonians as the target audience because they are the decision makers, they are the primary audience for *marketing* an experience at the State Capitol. From an interpretive perspective, children are also a key target audience.

Perhaps the most significant characteristic of the target audiences affecting the development of an effective interpretive network is the composition and size of groups visiting the capitol. Informal family groups create challenges due to different education levels and interests within the same group. Organized school groups are more homogenous since they are typically organized by grade level, but the size of the group creates significant challenges. Detailed profiles of the primary audiences can be found in the full Context Report.

Key parameters

Parameters relating to budget, staffing, vandalism, safety, physical infrastructure, potential complementary attractions, environmental conditions, policy and legal issues, use and visitor traffic patterns were all considered in terms of impact on the development and functioning of the interpretive network.

Of the parameters identified, one of the most significant is the different circumstances and opportunities between the times when the legislature is in session (when the capitol as a working building is dominant) and when it is not. When in session, the main public areas of the building are congested and noisy, making tours difficult and often increasing the difficulty in accessing fixed interpretive opportunities, such as the exhibit cases in the Galleria. Rooms that could be used to help tell stories, such as the Governor's ceremonial office, are often closed to the public, and room space is severely limited, which effectively eliminates the option of providing video presentations and talks within enclosed rooms. These challenges mostly disappear when the legislature is not in session, however, the visual of an 'active government' also disappears, which eliminates a key visual that could be used to help tell the story of our government. The differences between these two time periods are so significant, markedly different visitor experiences must be developed for each.

Other key parameters include the following:

- Space for fixed interpretive elements is very limited.
- A designated physical space will be a part of the interpretive network.
- Access to the tower is limited by weather conditions.
- Staff is limited; volunteers are necessary in order to maintain the number of tours currently offered.
- The layout of the buildings creates significant wayfinding and orientation issues.

A complete listing of parameters can be found in the full Context Report.

Key Visual Features (Opportunities)

Every feature in an environment is a potential prop for telling a story because it is evidence of an event, a mindset, a process or something else that occurred in the past. An interpretive experience tied to something a visitor can see or sense in the environment - one of the 'props' - is not only more attractive to visitors, it is more effective at communicating stories. The following are key features that can be used as focal points for stories:

- The Golden Pioneer;
- The architecture and layout of the original 1937 building, especially in contrast to the architecture of the wings;

- The floor of the Senate and the House, especially the different number of desks, the arrangement of desks, the voting buttons and voting boards and the public viewing galleries;
- The juxtaposition of the House, Senate and ceremonial Governor's Office;
- Hearing rooms, particularly Room 50 and the way it is set up;
- Murals in the rotunda, House chambers and Senate chambers;
- Oregon seal in the floor of the rotunda;
- The features visible to the west and the north from the terrace below the Golden Pioneer. The orientation of the building combined with historic features to the west tell the story of the change from the river as the major transportation route;
- Names around top of Senate and House Chambers;
- Events in the Galleria (an example of people participating)
- The busyness when the legislature is in session.

A complete list of visual features, and the potential stories that could be told using those features, can be found in the full Context Report.

Next Steps

The interpretive planning process has now moved to the next step - developing the concept for the network of interpretive and wayfinding strategies that will create a user-friendly visitor experience and maximize the opportunity to communicate the key messages and achieve the goals. Following approval of that concept, the process will shift to developing the final plan, which include a description of and design concepts for all strategies within the interpretive and wayfinding network, priority for implementation and other information to ensure a smooth transition from planning to implementation. We expect to complete the plan at the end of 2013 or early in the following year.