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## OPINION COLUMN

# Sustaining the intangible



By George Jacob, Museum Matters  
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Sustainability is a much pandered buzz word in the corporate and the non-profit sectors- a word that stands for using and saving resources towards economic, environmental and generational viability. A museum is a public institute for non-formal learning that is committed to collections, research, preservation, conservation, exhibition and education. It furthers its mission by offering programs that are inclusive and welcoming to diverse audiences. Adhering to accessibility standards for those with impairments and learning disabilities is integral to its endeavors.

Education is the single investment that engages and sustains civil societies. The wider issue of education for sustainability was first raised at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development at the Rio Earth Summit. The action plan adopted by the conference, set out broad parameters for rethinking public education along with awareness and training towards sustainable development. Many museums have incorporated these values in their mission and mandate.

Museum sustainability is often looked at by funders and stakeholders in terms of dollars and cents. Economic sustainability is a combination of revenue sources that are counter-balanced by a projection of expenses that museums incur with fixed and variable values based on their mission and mandates. The cost of securing the land and constructing a building are seldom recoverable for any museum. Common revenue sources once the museum opens include ticket sales, restaurant returns, sales from the museum gift shop, memberships, facility rental fees for events and special programs. Membership drives and fundraising campaigns augment these sources. Additional sources could include creation of travelling exhibits that may be rented out to other museums, publications, raffles, grant writing and corporate under-writing. Museums based in low population zones such as Drumheller and Wembley have to offer something unique to make it a destination for local residents and potential tourists. With each of these approaches, one has to focus on strategies for long-term economic sustainability. Additional opportunities at the Philip J. Currie Dinosaur Museum would involve offering paleo-helicopter tours, offering lab and study collections for a fee and extending consulting services in multiple areas of expertise including paleontology, destination marketing, tourism, exhibit design-build process, heritage preservation and museum practice.

Another facet of sustainability is environmental. The Philip J. Currie Dinosaur Museum adheres to LEED Gold standards (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), that ensures this to some extent. LEED buildings typically use less energy and function more efficiently while using materials and practices that are more environmentally friendly.

While simple economics of common sense must not be under-estimated or overlooked for its fiscal and functional viability, museums by their very definition are established as non-profit institutes established for a higher societal purpose. Social responsibility is intrinsically tied to sustainability. There is increasing recognition that cultural factors play a key role in sustainability.

Quality of life in the Peace region will continue to be determined by many factors including health, income, level of education, cultural diversity, social well-being, commercial and creative opportunities. Museums are collective repositories of Canadian heritage and essential threads of the intangible fabric that weaves us together as a proud generation- investing boldly in our future.

*George Jacob is a Canadian Commonwealth Fellow and founding President & CEO of the Philip J. Currie Dinosaur Museum.*

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