First Report on the Boston Athenaeum’s Operational Planning Process
January 9, 2015

This report marks the first in an ongoing series intended to share information about the Boston Athenaeum’s operational planning process. Updates on the planning process, and eventually, the resulting plan and annual progress reports on the plan’s execution, will appear on the Athenaeum’s website.

At the October 21, 2014 meeting, the Board of Trustees of the Boston Athenaeum invited Elizabeth Barker, who became Stanford Calderwood Director on October 1, 2014, to develop a plan for the Athenaeum’s operations over the next few years.

In the weeks following that meeting, Dr. Barker embarked on a period of preliminary research. She reviewed the Athenaeum’s 2012-2015 strategic plan and a report on the plan’s execution drafted by Deputy Director James Reid-Cunningham, and continued to read about the institution’s history. She reviewed notes from her individual meetings with 43 employees held over eight days in August and September (after Dr. Barker had been selected for the position but before she began the job); and reviewed notes from, or participated in meetings with, nearly every Trustee, many Proprietors, and several members in 14 private conversations and 23 group events in October and November. She reviewed comparable plans and planning processes at peer institutions, and conferred with 27 executive directors of other Boston cultural institutions.

Knowing that much remained to be learned, but feeling sufficiently grounded to proceed to the planning development stage, Dr. Barker conferred with the Athenaeum’s senior administrators (Associate Director John Lannon, Finance Director Hugh McCall, Mr. Reid-Cunningham, and Development Director Robert West) and with the Standing Committee of the Board of Trustees (President Deborah Bornheimer, Vice President Charles Coolidge, Secretary Elizabeth Owens, and Treasurer Gilbert Roddy) to determine the parameters of the planning process.

All agreed that the planning process should be inclusive, designed to engage as many types of Athenaeum patrons—current and prospective—as possible. The process should be efficient and conclude in time to incorporate its key objectives into budget planning for the next fiscal year (which will begin on October 1, 2015). The plan must be disciplined, articulating an achievable number of thoughtfully prioritized opportunities, rather than encompassing more work than could realistically be accomplished in the given timeframe. Above all, the plan must be implemented, closely monitored, adjusted as need, and completed on time and on budget.

To that end, the plan will state not only objectives, but also the proposed methods of implementing each initiative, well-reasoned estimates of anticipated costs, expected sources of funding, staff oversight responsibilities, and the methods and schedule for assessing the plan’s success or failure. For example, the plan will be reviewed at every monthly staff meeting of Athenaeum employees and at every quarterly meeting of the Board of Trustees, and the Athenaeum will present annual reports on its progress in meeting the goals of the plan on the website. Because the plan pertains to an institution
that honors good writing, Dr. Barker offered to draft the plan with an eye to clean prose and clear thinking.

Recognizing the value of candid commentary to this process, and wishing to avoid the subduing effect that the presence of senior administrators might have on conversations with other stakeholders, the Athenaeum researched, interviewed, and selected (on November 21, 2014) two experienced facilitators (from Top Floor Consulting) to facilitate the discussion sessions.

The facilitators launched the small-group discussions in December 2014, with six “vision sessions” to which every Athenaeum employee, including student interns, was invited, and which almost all attended. The facilitators also conducted briefer, individual conversations with all the senior administrators. In January and early February, 2015, 15 additional groups will assemble, each of these composed of selected representatives of one of the following communities:

- Members
- Proprietors
- Academic Researchers
- Writers
- Young Members
- Members with young children
- Recent visitors to the Athenaeum who chose not to become Members

Also in January and February 2015, the Athenaeum will distribute to all 5,000+ Members (and compile their responses to) an electronic survey, whose themes will be informed by the early discussion sessions.

At the January 20, 2015, Board meeting, the director will present an intermediate report on the planning process to the Trustees.

Beginning in mid-to-late February and extending into early March 2015, Dr. Barker, together with the senior administrators and consulting facilitators, will begin to review and analyze the copious amounts of information they expect to glean by all of these means.

At the March 12, 2015, regularly scheduled Athenaeum staff meeting, Dr. Barker will share the key objectives identified through this analysis, and invite colleagues to participate in developing and refining the working plan for their accomplishment.

Dr. Barker will share with the Board of Trustees the proposed operational objectives for review and discussion at the April 21, 2015, meeting. Following any final adjustments, the plan will be published in late May or early June 2015. This schedule would allow the Trustees to take into account the objectives identified in the plan at the July 21, 2015 Board meeting, at which the Athenaeum’s FY16 budget will likely be established.