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## Chicago's museums try to ride out bucking economy

### Hard times take toll on endowments, force cuts in hours, reductions in staff

By William Mullen

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The battered stock market has dealt a blow to many Chicago-area museums, zoos and public gardens, shrinking the value of endowment funds that many rely on for annual operating expenses.

So far, officials say they have been able to minimize cutbacks that would diminish exhibits and programs offered to the public, but some institutions have had to lay off employees and implement other cost-cutting measures.

Although attendance at the city's major museums remained steady in 2008, according to figures released last week, few administrators are confident that the trend will continue in 2009.

"There is no question that the slumping economy is leaving us with a different, new world," said Gary Johnson, president of the Chicago History Museum.

"If unemployment continues to grow, you assume families will be tightening their belts in general. Will they be less likely to use their discretionary income for things like museum visits?"

Museums typically use 3 to 5 percent of their endowment funds for annual operating expenses. When the Field Museum's \$315 million endowment dropped to \$220 million last year, officials bought out and laid off more than 35 employees and asked all staffers making more than \$75,000 to take pay cuts.

Facing similar woes, the Museum of Science and Industry last Friday laid off 15 people, about 4 percent of its full-time workforce, and froze the salaries of all other employees. The Chicago Botanic Garden laid off 14 employees in November. And Brookfield Zoo has laid off 2 percent of its staff and eliminated permanently a number of unfilled staff positions.

Layoffs are expected in the near future for both Lincoln Park Zoo and Newberry Library—10 workers out of 100 at the library and an undetermined number of 171 employees at the zoo.

The Shedd Aquarium, the most-visited cultural institution in the city last year, said its endowment fund



is also smaller, but thus far it has not had to make cutbacks or lay off staff. That is partly because it closed the Oceanarium for renovations late last year, reducing operational needs.

Museum administrators say they are trying to avoid changes that would affect the public, and no museums reported raising admission fees since the economic downturn began. Still, some cost-cutting signs are visible.

The Field Museum canceled a small, "Sesame Street"-themed exhibit about the human body that was to open early this year, and now opens at 10 a.m. instead of 9 a.m. daily. (It will open at 9 a.m. in the summer, on spring break and on holidays.)

"We felt the later opening would barely impact visitors and save us from having to staff our entrance kiosks for that one hour when so few people come here, anyway," spokeswoman Nancy O'Shea said.

Similarly, the Adler Planetarium is opening a half-hour later and closing a half-hour earlier on weekdays, saying attendance patterns showed it would not affect visitors much. The Adler saw its operating budget cut by 6 percent in the fall, for a total of \$700,000. It has not reduced staff but has frozen hiring.

In addition to staff cuts, the Newberry Library is reducing some programming. While it is going ahead with plans to open a Library of Congress traveling exhibit, "With Malice Toward None: The Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Exhibition" Oct. 10, spokeswoman Heather Malec said no further large-scale exhibits are being planned.

"We will continue with lobby and small spotlight displays," said Malec, "and our seminar, lecture, meet-the-author and teacher programs will continue too."

The Morton Arboretum suffered a drop in its \$234 million endowment to \$175 million, but spokeswoman Gina Tedesco said it avoided layoffs by cutting expenditures elsewhere. Public amenities remain virtually the same, she said, except for minor cutbacks in its restaurant service: no more fresh salad bar or pizza station.

The Chicago History Museum has not had to cut programs or staff, Johnson said, "but we have cut expenses. We asked all departments to cut their expenses by 10 percent, and we have frozen unfilled staff positions."

Among the first local museums to make big cutbacks was the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, which laid off 16 percent of its staff last fall "to strengthen our financial position," said Donna Gustafsson, the museum's acting president.

"We cut expenses at exactly the right time," she said. "Financially we are very strong as a result. We know some of the other museums are having some problems now because of the economy, but we actually will be operating at a profit when our fiscal year ends in June."

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