

The incredible shrinking subsidy: WNC Nature Center achieves 3-year reduction goal in one year

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Each day at 11:30 a.m., a crowd gathers around the Western North Carolina Nature Center's Otter Falls exhibit to watch a dynamic duo of river otters being fed. As music blares over the speakers, an education specialist throws fish in all directions with the otters in hot pursuit, diving in and out of the water while excited children watch, hands and faces pressed against the glass.

But these beloved aquatic performers are only one of the many native species on view at the Nature Center. And together with red wolves, cougars and black bears, they're helping to generate record-breaking attendance at the East Asheville facility, which opened in 1976.

The city of Asheville is a longtime supporter of the Nature Center, providing 58 percent of the organization's operating budget as recently as 2014. Around November of that year, however, the Finance Committee, which advises City Council, took a serious look at various Parks and Recreation operations. After much discussion and research, the committee took its findings to City Council in December. And since Asheville residents account for only about 25 percent of the Nature Center's visitors, Council members wanted to see that demographic reflected in the city's level of support. Accordingly, City Council asked the organization to come up with a plan for reducing its subsidy.

"We've always been very strongly managed, and the city's been a great supporter, obviously," says Director **Chris Gentile**. "But City Council forced everyone in the city, not just the Nature Center staff, to think of this as a business — a governmental business, certainly, but one that could absolutely cover more of its expenses. If you look at zoos nationwide that are run by a government entity, they're usually getting between a 25 percent and 33 percent

subsidy. At the time, our subsidy was way too high.”

In response, the Nature Center proposed establishing a committee that would look at ways to shrink the subsidy to 25 percent within three years. By last June, though, that goal had already been achieved.

Balancing act

“I think anytime you’ve got public resources like that, it’s a real balance between what should people pay for and what should just be an amenity,” **Vice Mayor Gwen Wisler** points out. “It’s along a spectrum, as you can imagine. You’re not going to charge for a park, but you may charge for certain parts of a park.”

Gentile says the city’s request was fair. “Clearly, we’re a regional, even national, attraction,” he says. “People come from all over the country to visit us — all over the world, actually — so that wasn’t the issue. But they wanted it to reflect the people who are actually paying taxes to support it.”

The “Otter Falls” exhibit attracts crowds to the WNC Nature Center. People can watch the otters being fed while listening to facts about them. Photos by Kari Barrows



In January 2015, a team composed of staffers from the Nature Center and its affiliated nonprofit plus Parks and Recreation Director **Roderick Simmons** and **Barbara Whitehorn**, the city’s chief financial officer, began hatching strategies. After additional research and public input, the group came up with a three-year plan that called for diminishing subsidies of 45, 33 and 25 percent.

“Council knew that we couldn’t just pull the Band-Aid off and go from 58 percent to 25 percent in one year, because we’d have to raise our fees and do a whole bunch of things that would make us nonaccessible to the majority of the people,” Gentile explains. In fact, however, the initial changes the center made far surpassed expectations.



Realizing that its admission fees had stayed the same for about 10 years, the Nature Center studied the fee structures of other zoos in the region and decided to raise each fee category by \$1.10, with discounts for city residents. Despite those increases, the center posted record attendance last year: 134,000, up from 121,978 in 2015. Meanwhile, the facility took other steps to increase revenue: updating the gift shop, adding more places to buy food, creating a gem-mining area, and implementing a voluntary program asking people to round up their admission charge to the next dollar.

“The money that gets rounded up gets put into an enhancement account specifically for the Nature Center,” Gentile explains. “So not only are we meeting our operational budget, we’re now creating revenue streams to keep us from having to tax the city’s resources when it comes to improvements.”

2020 Vision

Still other improvements resulted from the Nature Center's "2020 Vision" plan, adopted in 2009 to chart the facility's further expansion and development. A key component of the plan is creating programs that target a wider range of age groups.

Education Curator **Keith Mastin** feels the changes are really just part of the job. "We're really flexible. That's what environmental education is all about: being able to adjust and provide services for those out in the community."

And every staff member, he notes, has had input into the organization's financial planning, from small details to broader issues.

A little help from your friends

Another significant funder is the Friends of the WNC Nature Center, a nonprofit founded in 1974 that raises money through special events and membership programs. In response to the decreased subsidy, notes Executive Director **Kelly Christianson**, her organization began supporting the Nature Center in different ways.

"In the past, the Friends gave money to the Nature Center for capital improvements, like the bear structure or the new front entrance, and for very specific needs," Christianson explains. "This year, we'll contribute \$150,000 to the operating budget, and next year that will be \$175,000."

Advertising and marketing done by the Friends, she continues, is a key factor in attracting visitors. But the Nature Center isn't finished yet. On the heels of its remarkable success in generating additional revenue, the organization aims to become even more financially self-sufficient while achieving its "2020 Vision" goals. One of those goals, a new front entrance, will address what Gentile says are "challenges with parking and accessibility: It's tough to get spots on the upper level for strollers and things like that. So when the new front entrance opens, we feel like that's going to increase our attendance even more." Construction began Feb. 27 and is expected to take 12 to 18 months.

Encouraged by its success so far, the center now hopes to shrink its subsidy to 20 percent by June of next year, and if attendance continues to grow, Gentile believes this shouldn't be a problem.

Mastin, meanwhile, calls the increased attendance "a big response from the community, realizing that we are one of Asheville's gems. I don't think it's any big surprise, because it's our turn to be recognized. I think the citizens are very much fully supporting our efforts and what the Nature Center means for Asheville."

To view the full "2020 Vision" plan, visit wncnaturecenter.com.