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CITY OF LOS ANGELES
Department of Recreation and Parks

TO: Board of Recreation and Park Commissioners

DATE: February 18, 2021

FROM: Michael A. Shull, General Manager 

SUBJECT: **GRIFFITH OBSERVATORY PANDEMIC OPERATIONS AND PROGRAMMING**

Since March 12, 2020, the interior portions of Griffith Observatory (“Observatory”) have remained closed in accordance with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health guidelines for museums and in conformance with the City’s SaferLA directives. The exterior portions of the Observatory are open for parking, hiking, use of the lawn, walkways, vista sites, and general park use during normal operating hours.

Although the profound and rapid change to public operation and programming was abrupt and disorienting, the Observatory quickly developed procedures to maintain and improve the building and grounds and to explore viable alternate programming initiatives. As detailed below, these activities and programs include the deployment of mobile astronomy education programs, the development and launch of various online educational resources, support for the City’s emergency response activities, and the performance of various repairs and building improvements.

Enabling Astronomy from Home

To assist the public with online awareness and engagement, the Observatory staff leveraged new social media initiatives to promote daily postings of sky charts, tracking of notable celestial objects/sightings, development of astronomical viewing guides, and the creation of an evocative photograph gallery, all designed to help people observe high-quality content from home.

Transitioning *All Space Considered*

Despite closure, Observatory staff quickly shifted its monthly astronomy update, *All Space Considered*, to an online format, in lieu of its live-audience format conducted in the Leonard Nimoy Event Horizon theater, and so is now available as a live broadcast.

Bringing the Universe to Summer Play LA and Alternative Learning Centers

In congruence with the extraordinary effort by the Department to establish Summer Play LA (SPLA) sites, the Observatory developed a robust morning presentation series at various citywide centers to engage kids. In less than two months, the Observatory developed and executed its first external outreach program in more than two decades. The 40-minute program, focused on the sun and the solar system, included both live observation of the sun and the popular "Let's Make a Comet" demonstration. The team went to every SPLA site and repeated the same thing for the Alternative Learning Center sites in the fall.

Creating an Online School Program for Fifth-grade Students

Although schoolchildren have been making field trips to Griffith Observatory since its opening in 1935, the closure of the building meant suspension of the in-person, 2½-hour, fifth-grade-field-trip morning school program. To keep continuity of operations as much as possible, the Observatory programming staff began development of a live, interactive, online school program that would bring the Observatory to the students. This work was initiated a few months into the pandemic, after it became clear that the Observatory would remain closed for an undetermined but long time.

Focused on the fundamental notion of observing, the program provides opportunities to understand the meaning of observation with exhibits, live views through a telescope, video animation, and supplemental materials. The new live online school program is not just a recording of the onsite program. An entirely new structure, new flow, new script, and new visual effects were developed along with a mechanism for scheduling classes. The Friends Of The Observatory secured the technology for all of this to occur and acquired the highly specialized equipment the program requires. The first of five modules is now in place. With original digital animation, it transports students participating in class via their home computers to Griffith Observatory for a 35-minute live presentation by and interaction with Observatory Museum Guides and Telescope Demonstrators.

Over two thousand students have already participated from dozens of schools and classes across Los Angeles during the current test phase. Teachers routinely praise the program and express their gratitude for it. At this time, staff is running up to four sessions a day and plans to boost that to five.

Four more modules reflecting the rest of the content of the onsite program are under development and should be completed this school year.

Staff is also contemplating a continuation of online programming after the Observatory reopens in an attempt to extend the Observatory's reach to students that can't get to Griffith Observatory — a "silver lining" of the pandemic which will enhance virtual experiences Department-wide.

Designing a New Joint Website

For the last six months, in conjunction with Friends Of The Observatory and with the support and participation of the Executive Officer, the Observatory has worked with a professionally retained web and branding firm to develop a new, more robust, more ambitious, more sophisticated, and far more appealing multi-platform joint website with the Friends Of The Observatory. Scheduled for launch next month, it will feature updated speed, interactive modules, prospective online ticket ordering and reservations, membership content, contrasting day and night formats, and development of an online application process.

Publishing Public Astronomy

Throughout the pandemic, Griffith Observatory continues to prepare, publish, and deliver its monthly magazine, the *Griffith Observer*.

In addition, Griffith Observatory edited, compiled, coauthored, and published a new book, *Public Astronomy, Los Angeles Style*. Dr. David DeVorkin, Senior Curator for History of Astronomy at the National Air and Space Museum, and Observatory Director Dr. E.C. Krupp co-edited the volume. It is the first book to be published by Griffith Observatory since 1987. Copies should be available next month.

Supporting Film Production

Once filming was again permitted according to Los Angeles County public health rules, the film industry again called on Griffith Observatory to host and facilitate major and challenging onsite film production to help support the industry and re-establish filming. The Observatory staff, in conjunction with the Park Film Office, works to support these operations and to evaluate alternative ground uses while the Observatory remains closed.

Assisting Department Operations

Through much of 2020, the Observatory part-time staff members proudly worked to staff the citywide homeless shelters. When the Golf Division reopened, Observatory employees also worked to handle the demand at Department golf courses. Last summer, Observatory staff members were part of the team that helped reopen Griffith Park to mitigate traffic and then helped with trail monitoring to keep the park safe.

Improving the Building

The Department has taken advantage of the building's closure to make essential and numerous repairs and capital improvements. These include lighting

upgrades, interior and exterior painting, planetarium floor replacement, exhibit gallery and floor repair, water fountain replacement, bench renovation, and air conditioning repairs and improvements. More projects are planned for the coming months and serve as yet another “silver-lining” opportunity.

Conserving Observatory Collections

Observatory staff members have conducted long-delayed and fundamental archiving activities and undertaken comprehensive digitization of the extensive collection of art, illustration, painted planetarium panoramas, rare photographs, and other artifacts produced or collected over the last 86 years. The staff is also backing up the Observatory’s voluminous collection of astronomical imagery and data to the Cloud and intend to upgrade the Observatory’s out-of-date image storage and server infrastructure.

Putting Public Telescopes Online

On December 21, 2020, a small crew operating from the roof deck of the observatory accessed the winter solstice sunset and the great conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, their closest visible approach to each other in 800 years. Griffith Observatory’s YouTube livestream and posted recording have collected 2.5 million views.

On May 26, Griffith Observatory will offer a live broadcast of the total eclipse of the moon and it likely will be viewed by millions of people around the entire planet.

Soon after this meeting ends, Griffith Observatory will provide online coverage and commentary of the landing of NASA’s *Perseverance* spacecraft on Mars.

In the coming six months, Griffith Observatory will build on the technology and operational solutions pioneered by the online school program and will add live broadcasts of telescope views with live Telescope Demonstrator commentary.

Adding More Online Astronomy

Staff will turn the Observatory online production process to online presentations that feature building and exhibit experiences, like local noon in the Gottlieb Transit Corridor, Tesla coil demonstrations, and operation of the Foucault pendulum.

Preserving Knowledge of Staff Lost to Retirement

Staff has spent a significant time in the last four months preparing for the Separation Incentive Program departure of one-fourth of the Observatory’s full-time staff. The five retiring employees represent 160 years of specialized

experience and include two senior managers (the Observatory Curator and the Operations Manager), the Observatory's telescope manager—who is responsible for singular, historic, and invaluable instruments, and the Observatory's world-renowned art director—whose impact on revenue-generating planetarium shows was profound. Staff has been racing to document fully a massive amount of technical knowledge and expertise before it is irrevocably lost.

Before Covid-19 arrived and before the SIP program had been conceived, the Observatory was already missing four other key full-time staff members.

Reopening the Building

Staff has already developed a detailed plan to reopen Griffith Observatory in conformance with the Department and City's Reconstitution Plans once that is possible. At the time Griffith Observatory had to close last March, production of *Signs of Life*, the new live planetarium show with 8K digital animation, was nearly completed. The last production work was finished in spring, 2020, but the ambitious promotional campaign that was about to begin had to be suspended. Public health protocols for interactive museums and theaters are likely to remain complex for some time to come. Accordingly, the premiere of *Signs of Life* should be delayed to an optimum date after the Observatory reopens.

The monumental challenge for reopening will be staffing. The full-time staff is now less than it was before the renovation and expansion began in 2002. When the Observatory reopens, it will magnetically draw visitors and have to manage again more than 1.6 million visitors each year. Observatory daily operations rely on a large number of trained and experienced part-time personnel. A significant number of them have not been working at all during this period, and it is not clear how many will return. To reestablish and maintain public operations, the Observatory will have to replace key full-time staff and hire and train adequate part-time staff. As such, the Observatory will continue to work with the Department to plan and prepare best for future operations and public access as it maintains a stellar reputation for excellence known across the globe and as Los Angeles's most popular recreational site.