I think we have all been shaken, each in our own way, by the discussion that is raging about the plans of the Berkshire Museum. We are not accustomed to having the decisions of a modest museum debated in the pages of the national press, dominating the letters page of the local paper for weeks, and attracting the attention of national organizations. Everyone— from art bloggers and journalists, to museum professionals, to residents of the Berkshire current and former — seems to have an opinion. The case is being tried in public and soon in court. Suddenly, it seems, that everyone— not just relevant professionals - is weighing in on financial performance and management, nonprofit law, museum ethics, the efficacy of fundraising efforts, museum planning, and the intricacies of contracts concerning art auctions. I am sure you all have opinions on those subjects as well. You may think that the decisions are a travesty. You may think they represent an unfortunate but necessary step to save a 114 year old institution. Or you may think that the new direction is a bold and appropriate re-invention.

But none of that is what we are here to talk about this morning. I want to say that again. We are not here to debate— much less malign— the specific decisions and actions of the Berkshire Museum. If that was what you came to do, our apologies.

What are we here for? I think we all agree that museums, in their role as stewards of important collections and other assets, must uphold ethical standards. Many of us have seen those standards change over time— largely for the better. And we have seen them challenged before, although generally in a less public way. We have seen what some of us consider violations of those standards on the part of colleague institutions. But we still attempt to stand by them.

We understand that our professional judgment and decisions must be balanced by the fiduciary responsibilities of our boards, which have the legal responsibility for our institutions. Our boards— all nonprofit boards— are the surrogates for the attorney general of our state who, in turn, protects the interests of the citizens, both people who have supported the nonprofit directly with donations and those who have indirectly, through foregone tax revenue.

We also know that it is not easy to manage and fund a museum in 2017. For many museums, our donor base is aging and/or moving to warmer climates. Our smaller cities— places like Lewiston, ME, Manchester, NH, Fall River, MA, Fitchburg, MA, Bridgeport, CT, and yes, Pittsfield - once thriving communities with strong economies, are now “gateway cities” with empty mills or factories and struggling populations, often recent immigrants. The museums that depend on admissions and other earned income are seeing increased competition from commercial ventures and other leisure time options. While many of our endowments have recovered from 2008, returns on those endowments are still weak. And the nonprofit sector has grown 20% in the last 10 years, compared 2-3% in the for profit sector. Competition for donors is fierce and development operations more advanced. It is hard to keep up, particularly for smaller museums.

At the same time, expenses are rising as our professional practices become more sophisticated and complex. And as our audience expectations rise. We hear… “Nice that you are on Facebook, everyone I know has moved on to Snapchat.” Or “Why can’t I search your archival and object collections online?”
Our staffs may still be underpaid, but there are more of them. And the overhead associated with each staff member is increasing – from the costs of health care and technology support alone.

So our task today is to be kind, realistic and constructive. What are the issues and what might be some practical solutions? What do museums, their staffs, and their boards need? How can NEMA help and how can we help each other?

Here’s what will happen. We will spend some time now getting from you what you think the issues and questions are so that we start from a shared set of questions and ideas. I may use the prerogative of the facilitator to move some observations to flip chart two. As you may know, AAM is convening a longer discussion of this topic at the Harvard Museum of Natural History on December 14 and 15. We will capture all ideas but forward some to AAM for that longer discussion.

Then we will talk at our tables for 30-40 minutes. We have volunteer facilitators for each table who will keep the conversation moving and who will take notes. Their task is to help you develop some actionable ideas and solutions that “both support museum field standards and museums in crisis.”

At your tables, engage in what we call constructive listening. Listen to each other, think before you speak, and try bridging comments with “and” rather than “but.” We will disagree, but the goal is a discussion, not an argument.

Rather than report back table by table, we will then open up the floor and ask for the ideas that generated the most enthusiasm and energy and let the whole group develop them some more.

Where does all this lead? NEMA’s goal is to help craft solutions that help its members and the field. NEMA is planning to write an article for the December issue of New England Museums Now and hold a webinar on January 31, 2018. For that reason, we ask you to take good notes and turn everything in before you leave this room.

I want to thank and introduce our facilitators.

Jane Becker, Internship Coordinator & Lecturer of History, UMass Boston
Robert Burns, Executive Director, Mattatuck Museum
Julia Gray, Director of Collections & Research, Abbe Museum
C. Morgan Greve, Executive Director, Rhode Island Historical Society
Emily Holmes, Education Director, Paul Revere Memorial Association
Devon Kurtz, Director of Audience Engagement, Blackstone Heritage Corridor
Laurie P. Lamarre, Executive Director, Connecticut League of History Organizations
Diane Lee, Collections Manager, Fairfield Museum
Elisabeth Nevins, Seed Education Consulting
Phillippa Pitts, Associate Educator for Gallery Learning & Interpretive Media, Portland Museum of Art
Pieter Roos, Executive Director, Mark Twain House
Todd Smith, Interim Executive Director, American Textile History Museum
Ruth Taylor, Executive Director, Newport Historical Society
Edith Tonelli, Director, Cape Cod Museum of Art
Kenneth Turino, Manager of Community Engagement and Exhibitions, Historic New England
Lawrence Yerdon, President & CEO, Strawbery Banke Museum