

January 8, 2024

The Honorable Robert “Bobby” M. Dyer, Mayor
Members of City Council

Subject: Virginia Aquarium

Dear Mayor and City Council Members:

As we enter 2024, the Virginia Aquarium Foundation and I would like to provide the following information for your deliberation and action. Valuable partners since 1983, the Foundation has provided over \$100 million in direct support to the City’s Aquarium since the initial construction of the Main building. As instrumental partners to the Aquarium’s success, we hope our thoughts below are considered.

Our board has actively listened to you and the City Manager, and we have revised the size and scope of our expansion project. The new proposal constructs only areas essential to the aging infrastructure of our large exhibits for our seals, sharks, and sea turtles. These revised plans provide new spaces for the animals in a new building. The costs associated with constructing a parking structure and the renovation of the existing exhibits has been eliminated. Our consultants estimate the cost of the revised project at approximately \$50-\$75 million depending on the scope and will still provide a new modernized aquarium. I would be pleased to provide these updated plans to you at a future City Council workshop once the “alternative ownership” process is complete.

As we commence conversations with private firms (exploring the “alternative ownership” model), we humbly request you require the following commitments. We consider these expectations fundamentals of the Aquarium and are core principles since inception. Over the years, these attributes have become underlying expectations of our taxpayers, tourists, and guests. Our hope is these elements will continue through the entire lease period of any private entity operating the Aquarium.

As discussed below in no order of importance, the entity must:

1. Commit to maintaining the Virginia Aquarium’s accreditation with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), the Alliance for Marine Mammals and Parks (AMMPA), and the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA).
2. Provide at least \$50,000 in free or reduced tickets for Title I school children to visit the Virginia Aquarium annually.
3. Distribute a minimum of 700 Virginia Aquarium passes for regional organizations requesting tickets for charitable events supporting environmental conservation, science education, and underserved populations in Hampton Roads.

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4. Provide at least 15,000 students annual onsite and offsite programs designed to support the Commonwealth of Virginia's Science Standards of Learning (SOLs). The curriculum addresses elements of all 6 focus areas: Scientific and Engineering Practices, Force, Motion, and Energy, Matter, Living Systems and Processes, Earth and Space Systems, and Earth Resources.
5. Maintain the partnership established with the Virginia Beach City Public School system to provide at least 15 student mentor slots per school year for the Environmental Studies Academy program.
6. Maintain official stranding agreements and permits with Federal and State agencies. This includes allocating \$3.5 million per year in funds for staffing and resources required to maintain Stranding Response Program activities and investigations for Virginia marine mammals and sea turtles.
7. Participate as a member of the Aquarium Conservation Partnership with the following agreements: No single-use plastics on-site and achieve carbon neutrality for the Virginia Aquarium Facility by the year 2030.
8. Provide at least \$30,000 per year in paid internships for college students to work at the Virginia Aquarium while receiving a stipend.
9. Spend at least \$100,000 per year in professional development for full-time Virginia Aquarium staff members to obtain certifications in Life Support, Veterinarian Care, Exhibit Design, Sustainability, and to attend conferences with the accrediting agencies.
10. Maintain full-time veterinary staffing (2 veterinarians and 2 support staff) in accordance with the facility size and diversity of resident population.
11. Provide financial support for background checks, uniforms, and training for approximately 800 volunteers per year without passing the costs to the volunteer.
12. Provide ongoing annual changing exhibits (at least one per year) for the Aquarium to attract new audiences.
13. Provide at least 4,000 free tickets per year to Military families distributed by the USO.

The commitment from any future owner (to the above items) ensures the Virginia Aquarium remains a vital cultural, educational, and tourist attraction for the citizens of Virginia Beach. I urge you to continue the standard of excellence the Virginia Aquarium delivers to our community.

If you have any questions, or need further clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me at dan.peterson@truist.com.

Respectfully,



Daniel R. Peterson
Chair of the Virginia Aquarium Foundation

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cc: Patrick Duhaney, City Manager
Kenneth Chandler, Deputy City Manager

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