SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Again, four of the focus groups were made up of individuals from the general community, including parents, business owners, and community and non-profit leaders; one was educator-specific, with representatives from area public, independent, and charter schools.

All five focus groups expressed a desire for the following:

- Outdoor space that is interactive, self-directed and compelling enough that adults will stop and check it out (QR codes, touch screens, play space, outdoor displays and exhibits, self-guided tours). Also, changing displays and programs frequently so there's always something new to see is important.

- Classroom and education space that is flexible and can accommodate traditional classes (with speaker and AV) and training that requires large, open, indoor and outdoor spaces.

- A fresh water aquarium and display (could be small or large) that provides experiences of the fish and reptiles of the region.

- An extended-hour campus that is open until sundown so visitors can walk around, see, and experience the site even when buildings are closed.

- Versatile education space related to all the organizations on the site and integrating topics/activities such as leadership and team building with academics (math, science, etc.) Example: learning math while building a boat.

- Connecting to area festivals and events (e.g., Cherry Festival, Film Festival). Some participants suggested incorporating maritime films into the TC Film Festival; others suggested storytelling as part of the Cherry Festival.

- A "mixed-use" site with activities that are both educational and fun for all ages; include commercial space (restaurants, retail, rentals), event space, an amphitheater; make it easy to spend the day with lots of diverse activities and food.

- A connection to TART Trail; create a natural loop from Cedar Lake and a bridge over the stream; create signage and an entrance on the trail for Discovery Center.

- Development of safe access to the Bay.

The four non-educator sessions identified the following as important:

- Weather education and real-time weather reporting, sailing education and opportunities to access the Bay by boat and providing cultural experiences such as spending the night on a schooner.

- “Aging up” the Children’s Museum (one group suggested “rebranding it” as museum for all ages).

- Providing opportunities for people to arrive at the site in a different way, perhaps by trail, bike, water taxi, trolley; or establish a bio fuel bus that makes a continuous loop to transport visitors.

- Creating a highly visible site that captures attention from M22 (Ideas suggested included a tower, lighthouse structure, ship, rooftop deck, large sails, running water, artist murals, sculptures like a giant hiker, sailor, or animals; replicate large artwork with smaller icons throughout the site.)

- Creating an integrated theme and design for campus; either one central building for all offices or easy movement between buildings; perhaps a “mall concept” with some individual sites and some multi-purpose sites.

- Creating a central hub to enter the campus with all organizations represented with education programs, displays, videos, meeting rooms, office space (could be an interpretive center or visitor center). The campus should include a site map and schedule of events; something like Sleeping Bear Dunes Visitor Center.

EDUCATOR-SPECIFIC FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Educators stressed that students need to know as much about their own backyards and local environment as possible; currently they know more about exotics such as zebra mussels than they do native fish. **Along these lines, the educators found the following ideas important:**

- Access to and use of the wetlands area behind the Discovery Center, so that students can better understand the relationship of the watershed to Lake Michigan.

- A board walk and an outdoor classroom such as platform or gathering point in the wetlands area with teaching stations where they can work with students on simple to more complex concepts for the very young to the adult learner. The site should include places where students can sit and observe/listen and covered spaces in case of inclement weather.

- Access to an indoor classroom that can be messy. As well as a space that includes a computer station (or wireless network- students can use smart phones or laptops) and lab space where they can analyze samples taken from the wetlands (soil, water, etc.). They also need a place to store coats and backpacks, and tables for lunch.

- Educators stressed having opportunities for students to have "touch and do" experiences on the site.

- Access to recording equipment where students can capture sounds and images could be of educational benefit.

Other ideas for Discovery Center ~ Great Lakes that were specified by the educator focus group included:

- Creating a site that complements but doesn't duplicate the Boardman River Nature Center; but pointed out that the Discovery Center has something that Boardman doesn't – the relationship between the wetlands and Lake Michigan.

- A "green" focus in construction and maintenance of the site that can be used as a demonstration. They suggested having a solar-powered computer station. They also suggested developing a rain garden that demonstrates what happens to rain and run off and how a wetland filters it clean.

- Providing family education opportunities. Some examples were: night-time bug collecting, handing the family a water testing kit, self-directed experiences.

Education Curriculum for Discovery Center ~ Great Lakes

Educators also stressed a need for a consistent, rigorous educational track that progresses from year to year, is tied to academic standards, provides study guides, and includes preparatory work that occurs before arriving on site. This education track should ideally be multi-disciplinary (incorporating math, science, language arts, economics, history, political science, etc.) and could include fitness. For example, kids could be hiking, kayaking, canoeing, or biking, while they are learning. The program needs to be ready to go for educators and tied to the Michigan core curriculum in order for area schools to be able to access it.

The Discovery Center will need to work hand-in-hand with schools on curriculum (like the Inuit Studies program through Dennos Museum). Suggestions for curriculum development include: applying for grant funding to develop curriculum, working in partnership with educators, publishing a “Call for Curriculum Development” and tapping into and adjusting curriculum that is already nationally available.

Participants also pointed out that for successful use of the site by educators, schools need funding/grant money to underwrite field trips and programming.

Specific educational program/curriculum ideas included:

- Creating an educational track that starts at the Bay (where settlers arrived, how they survived - fishing, shipwrecks, commerce, how they accessed and used wetlands, how they were inspired to write and create art).

- Testing the stream at various spots or studying why the water flows the way it does and why the region looks the way it does (from glaciers).

- Study impervious surfaces (like the parking lot). What’s the impact on the watershed of impervious pavement?

- Night-time experiences (catch bugs at night, study during day; bats; bird banding; owls).

- Tracing the history trail (include old news items about cholera epidemic, sewage going into the Bay).