

IRVINE NATURE CENTER CULTIVATING COMMUNITY CASE STATEMENT

BACKGROUND/EVIDENCE OF NEED:

While Irvine Nature Center has operated continuously since 1975, the organization has changed significantly since our founding as a 25-acre nature center on the campus of St. Timothy's School in Stevenson, Maryland. Irvine today has evolved into a complex 211-acre property, with much of that evolution taking place in the past decade. Since the organization first settled into its original 116 acres at its Owings Mills location, it created 8 miles of scenic trails, acquired a 94-acre Bauer Preserve, conducted a 66-acre wetland restoration, and recently added a small but important acre that provides important frontage on Garrison Forest Road. Growth in Irvine's land has provided many opportunities for increased programming which includes the creation of an award-winning Nature Preschool in 2011 which is now at capacity with 56 students; a multitude of early Childhood Education programs, all at capacity; school field trips typically on a daily basis throughout the school year with many from Title I schools throughout the region; Summer Nature Camp for 10 weeks each summer with over 650 in attendance; adult programs including our evening *Eat, Drink and Learn* lecture series; weekend family programs including Holidays with Hoot, Maple Magic, and Springfest; our Health and Wellness through Nature Program inspiring adults through holistic wellness; and a significant number of rentals including birthday parties, weddings, and other celebrations for diverse audiences. The significant growth that Irvine has experienced over the past decade has contributed to what can be considered a reinvention of the organization. Irvine takes considerable pride in its history of successfully redefining how it operates as a larger and more complex nonprofit, while maintaining lean and efficient operations and without skipping a beat on delivering excellent programming.

In 2019, prior to the pandemic, Irvine was bursting at the seams with hundreds of environmental education programs, numerous events, activities, and rentals, and an abundance of full-time and part-time staff to handle the growth. Many indoor and outdoor spaces were being multi-purposed, attendance at most programs was at or over capacity, and there was no more room in the existing Weinberg Environmental Education building to accommodate more programs or staff. When the pandemic hit in 2020, early childhood program educators were relocated from the staff offices on the lower level to space upstairs in the closed Exhibit Hall to spread out staff members for health and safety reasons. Simultaneously, as Irvine's indoor facilities were closed, families flocked to Irvine to be outdoors to hike on our trails, socially distanced from others. Irvine quickly became a popular destination for children, adults, and families to reap the benefits of physical exercise in a safe, outdoor environment. With so many new families discovering Irvine during this challenging time, it solidified the need for Irvine to take a step back and take a broader global look at all programs, property and facility use. In doing so, the organization assessed how it could move from a perceived "hidden gem" in the community to a valued nature-based destination, serving a more diverse audience from around the region. Guided by a new Strategic Plan with a focus on broadening awareness about our people and property and ensuring that Irvine is a place where all feel welcome, our organization has strived to reach new and diverse audiences in the following ways: conducted extensive outreach to Title I schools in the region to offer grant-funded field trips for under-resourced youth on our property; established a DEI committee to model diversity in all of its policies, practices and procedures to create an environment in which everyone feels safe, valued and respected; hosted our first Indigenous People's Day community event to honor the many contributions of Maryland's First People; and introduced PRIDE Outside for teens, establishing

Irvine as a designated Baltimore County Safe Space. The building and expansion project will further solidify our efforts to provide access to more diverse audiences on our campus.

Of note: Irvine has rebounded from the pandemic and now exceeds program and attendance numbers from those in 2019. The need for this expansion project is greater than ever before as more families move towards the outdoor learning model and embrace environmental literacy.

Assessment Process:

Irvine retained GWWO Architects, the firm that constructed the original Weinberg Education building, to conduct a comprehensive facility assessment and space audit. From 2020 to 2021, the Facility Assessment and Expansion Study consisted of three phases: Exploration, Programming, and Masterplanning. The overall intent of this process was to comprehensively review Irvine's existing facilities and programs, identify site opportunities for a possible building expansion, and determine the optimal design approach to meet Irvine's current and anticipated spatial needs.

During the Exploration Phase, GWWO toured the facilities with Irvine staff and surveyed all actively used indoor and outdoor spaces within the core of Irvine's campus. GWWO then met with key Irvine stakeholders to gather detailed knowledge about how Irvine currently operates, as well as future programming spatial needs. These meetings focused on Education, Exhibits and Animal Care, Operations, and the Board of Trustees' goals. Taylor Studios, Inc., an exhibit design firm that specializes in nature centers, and GWWO, sought to understand both how the Exhibit Hall currently functions and how it might be revitalized.

During the Programming Phase, GWWO and Irvine synthesized a range of inputs collected during the Exploration Phase to determine space sizes, focusing particularly on flexible and outdoor spaces.

In the Masterplanning Phase, multiple design approaches were test fit within the existing building and site. Three options were developed, and the advantages and disadvantages of each were analyzed based on their various impacts on the current building and site. These ideas were presented to Irvine's Executive Committee and subsequently to the Board of Trustees. Option three, which co-locates three Preschool classrooms beneath a permanent Events Space east of the main building and minimally renovates the interior, was strongly preferred by Irvine, so this idea was developed in further detail.

Scope of Study:

During the study, every important space in the center of Irvine's campus was thoroughly surveyed, discussed, and evaluated. Since the original building was completed in 2008, Irvine's breadth and quality of programs has only grown, so special attention was given to areas that have been adapted from their original intended use. The group also studied how Irvine's leaders envision key programs and events evolving over the coming years.

The chosen design approach includes the Nature Preschool with the Program and Event Space as a stand-alone addition, optimizing program relationships while planning future flexibility. Similar to the existing building, it envisions a two-story structure set into the existing hill, with three Nature Preschool classrooms located below the events space. This option augments the advantages of classroom co-location by creating direct outdoor access within each classroom to

a shared, secure outdoor playscape. Preschool teachers would also gain a dedicated collaboration space next to the elevator and stairs that could be used for a wide range of meetings. Each classroom would also have its own dedicated restroom and storage space en suite.

In the existing Weinberg Education building, the Animal Care Room will be doubled in size to accommodate the feeding and caring for our 50 animal residents. Exhibits showcasing our animals and conservation work on our property will be vastly improved; and the existing upstairs classroom will be repurposed for our Little Birds' semester-long, weekly classes for children birth to age three with caregivers.

The chosen design approach harnesses the unique advantages of this site while preserving the sense of place that makes Irvine so unique. By connecting the addition to the existing building with a covered breezeway and overhead walkway, the new building is both independent and linked to the larger campus. Similarly, by aligning its walls perpendicularly to the main building and sitting back from the parking lot, the addition allows visitors a more comfortable arrival experience.

Large, operable "barn" type doors are envisioned on both sides of the Main Hall so that the views currently enjoyed within the temporary tent are retained. These doors could remain open for events for much of the year. The balcony further encourages visitors to take in the forest beyond. The elevator is also more conveniently located than in the existing building, making it easier to access the Preschool classrooms, accessible paths, and Outdoor Classroom below. The Catering, Storage, and Concessions spaces will support the range of programs and events planned for the Main Hall.

At the lower level, concentrating the Nature Preschool with three classrooms and a shared outdoor play space grants a multitude of benefits. Teachers gain a dedicated collaboration space on this floor, as well as covered entries, desks, outdoor cubbies, and right-sized restrooms for each classroom. Since the classroom windows are south-facing, natural daylight can fill each room. The classrooms will be acoustically insulated from the Main Hall above. As emphasized by Irvine Staff, Leadership, and Board members, this design approach prioritizes simple, straightforward opportunities to get outside and explore the rest of the campus. By forming a secure, dedicated outdoors Preschool play space, the adjacent Outdoor Classroom (currently used by Preschool when in session) can again be used by other students during the day and Preschool students can leave projects safely secured overnight.

The preferred option allows Irvine to invest in the next 15 to 20 years while embodying its values in a thoughtful building expansion. By limiting its footprint and incorporating natural, sustainable elements into the expansion, Irvine can continue its leadership as a responsible steward of the natural environment and broader community. The preferred design is efficient and conscientious, simultaneously meeting Irvine's current needs while planning for future flexibility and growth. It builds on the significant strengths of Irvine's campus and will add to its beauty and remarkable sense of place. Expanding in this way will allow Irvine to continue to inspire people to explore, respect, and protect nature. Furthermore, the project embellishes all the priorities laid out in Irvine's most recent Strategic Plan which includes Stewarding Irvine's Land and Facilities, Creating Strong Community Connections, Investing in Organizational Capacity, Delivering Robust and Impactful Programming, and Ensuring Irvine's Financial Sustainability.

PROJECT SPECIFICS:

Preschool Classrooms:

Existing Condition:

- 840 square feet of classroom space. Typical occupants are 15 children and 2 teachers.
- Preschool Classrooms are on opposite ends and floors of the Weinberg building. This creates confusion and lack of cohesion between classes.
- Both classrooms are too small for growing class sizes.
- No dedicated restroom for Preschool children.
- Limited storage space.

Suggested Changes:

- Bring all Preschool classrooms together in one area for more centralized space.
- Lower level of new building to create 1,000 square foot of space for 3 full-time classrooms with mudrooms and toilets; classrooms could be multi-purposed when Preschool not in session for other activities and events.
- Additional Small Conference Room to accommodate teacher/caregiver meetings.
- Dedicated storage room.
- More efficient child drop-off and flow of circulation.

Event Space:

Existing Condition:

- Temporary 3,000 square foot tent structure with inadequate heating/cooling for much of the year (only operates March through November).
- No adjacent staging and/or storage space for event tables, chairs. Currently, tables and chairs are laboriously moved by staff from silo storage around the building to the tent pad. Caterers use multipurpose classrooms during events.

Suggested Changes:

- 3,000 square feet; 200+ capacity
- The upper level of the new building includes enclosed, large, conditioned space for year-round programs and events.
- Will retain connection to outdoors and have a barn atmosphere.
- Included will be event support spaces such as restrooms, catering preparation, storage, concessions, coat closet.

Exhibit Hall:

Existing Condition:

- Original to the building. 2,200 square feet. Intended to be a space to educate visitors about local nature, animals, and ecosystems; some special events; staging/introductory space for field trips.
- Overall square footage is adequate, but displays are heavy and static. Floor outlets have issues with water from large tanks, overhead lighting inadequate, outdated interpretive content.
- Under-sized and non-functional Discovery Room.

Suggested Changes:

- New exhibit displays would be mobile (could be unplugged and moved quickly) so that the Exhibit Hall increases its flexible use for a variety of events. Must still be convertible to banquet/dining/event space.
- Exhibits need to tell unique stories in a clear manner of Irvine's animals as well as conservation efforts in the Piedmont region with mechanical, sensory elements such as push buttons or durable touch activities.

Animal Care in Exhibit Hall:

Existing Condition:

- 290 square feet housing 50+ animals in tanks, terrariums, and cages.
- Overcapacity; inadequate size for current animals; island sinks, and unusual shape also limit workable space; live exhibits are only accessible from front not from animal care room making feeding challenging.

Suggested Changes:

- Double the existing size, reconfigure, and increase electrical capacity.

Discovery Room:

Existing Condition:

- 240 square foot space is currently used for Little Birds classes.
- The classroom is too small for the growing program.
- Need nearby storage for program materials and supplies.

Suggested Changes:

- 500 square foot space; double the size of existing space.
- Spacious accommodations for Little Birds; flexible additional space for other early childhood education programs.
- Stroller-accessible; ample dedicated storage for Little Bird classes.

Project Timeline:

January 2024 – January 2025: Design and Planning Phase with GWWO, Inc.

Spring 2025: Public Phase of Capital Campaign begins

March 2025: 90% or \$5.8 million raised for capital campaign

Summer 2025: Construction of new building begins

Spring 2026: Final \$.7 secured

Spring 2026: Renovations to Exhibit Hall begin

Fall 2026: Construction of new building concludes

Fall 2026: Grand Opening of New Building and Exhibit Hall

CULTIVATING COMMUNITY PROJECT TEAMS:

Facility Assessment and Expansion Study Team:

Brooks Paternotte, Executive Director
Courtney Sagal, Deputy Director
Katie Rooney, Director, Early Childhood Education Programs
Nettie Washburn, Irvine Board of Trustees
George Reynolds, Irvine Board of Trustees
Chris Elcock, Associate Principal, GWWO Architects
Evan Greulich, Project Architect, GWWO Architects
Sarah Drees, Taylor Studios, Inc.
Grace Carroll, Taylor Studios, Inc.
Madeline Schnorr, Taylor Studios, Inc.

Campaign Leadership Team:

Anna Smith, Irvine Trustee, Co-Chair
George Reynolds, Irvine Trustee, Co-Chair
Ted Bauer, Irvine Trustee, Honorary Co-Chair, Cultivating Community Campaign

Irvine Nature Center Leadership Team:

W. Brooks Paternotte, Executive Director
Courtney Sagal, Deputy Director
Katie Remenapp, Director of Development
Katie Rooney, Director of Early Childhood Education Programs
Cathy Rose, Director of Finance
Kristen Cooper, Director of Marketing and Communications

Outside Leadership

Alan Reed, President, GWWO Architects
Jack Finney – Irvine trustee, Engineer and Principal, Finney-Lynn, LLC; Project Manager,
Cultivating Community Capital Campaign
Jamie Brown, Beechbrook Landscape, Landscape Architect
CapEx Advisory Group – Owners Representative, Financial Advisor and Specialty Consultant
(To ensure the effective implementation of near-, mid-, and long-term initiatives for this capital project, Irvine is pulling in additional expert external resources to complete the project management team. Irvine is currently in conversation with the CapEx Advisory Group, a team of financiers, developers, fundraisers, and design professionals, to potentially assist with project management and oversight.)

Irvine Nature Center Executive Committee:

David O. Dardis, President
Harry William Holt, Jr., Vice President; Chair, Strategic Planning Committee
Nettie Washburn, Secretary
Leah Maddox, Treasurer; Chair, Finance Committee
Jack Finney, Chair, Facilities Committee
Anna Smith, Past President; Chair, Cultivating Community Campaign
Josh Levinson, Member, Finance Committee
Amy Boebel, Chair, Development Committee