



Mona Colburn: Incredibly, Illinois State Museum could be history

I believe Gov. Bruce Rauner was given bad advice when told to close the Illinois State Museum.

Much has been written about the museum's positive effect on Illinois' economy. I would like to share some of my personal experiences and a bit of what goes on behind the scenes.

I work at the Research and Collections Center, which is the museum's off-site location for collections, laboratories and offices. I have worked at the museum for 33 years, but not as a state employee. Rather, I've been a researcher employed by its nonprofit foundation, the Illinois State Museum Society.

What this means for me is that for 33 years I have had skill sets that make the museum marketable to outside funding entities. What it means for the state is that the museum society is a successful private business partner that has multiplied the effectiveness of taxpayers' dollars.

Museum exhibits have been enhanced by an authenticity and accuracy gained from research funded by other entities. We have earned a standing of respect among museums and researchers worldwide through hard work and a standard for excellence.

This public-private partnership is one in which the fruits of our labors have trickled down to citizens and others outside our borders. From the following examples of projects on which I have worked — all funded by entities other than the state — you will see the museum requires specialized workers who often need to be the proverbial Jack or Jill of all trades.

- * As a teacher with the Museum Tech Academy, I was funded by the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This multi-year, after-school program educated students in STEM subjects in a way that was fun, yet required self-motivation by the students.
- * Commissioned by other museums, I have produced numerous fossil replicas of large Ice Age mammals. Replicas made in the museum casting lab have educated and entertained visitors not only in our museum, but also in the Yukon, South Africa, Canada and various states. This summer, the Indiana State Museum and the Royal Alberta Museum in Edmonton, Canada, requested replicas. These jobs are contingent on the Illinois State Museum staying open.
- * Donations paid for me to replicate a skeleton of a Jefferson's Giant Ground Sloth, an extinct Ice Age mammal. Visitors can see it in the museum's **Changes!** exhibition.
- * I replicated fossils for the dig pit in the museum's Mary Ann MacLean Play Museum for children. Digging for fossils while playing paleontologist is one of our many popular activities in which kids learn and create while playing.
- * For years, the museum's fossil replicas have been used as touchable displays at the Illinois State Fair in Springfield and Du Quoin and at the annual Rock, Fossil and Gem Show. These hands-on interactions are just a few of the many ways the Illinois State Museum takes the show on the road so citizens outside the capital city can appreciate the fruits of their state museum.



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There's more to the museum than most know

By [Mona Colburn](#)

This letter expresses my objection to closing the Illinois State Museum system. I believe that Gov. Bruce Rauner was given bad advice when told to close the museum. Although figures showing the positive economic impact of the museum system are readily available, his advisers could not have known all the ways in which the museum positively impacts people and agencies beyond our state's physical borders, and beyond the temporal boundaries of the present. I would like to share several of my personal experiences that demonstrate some of the Illinois State Museum's wide-ranging impacts.

I have worked at the Illinois State Museum for 33 years, but not as a state employee. Rather, I have been a researcher employed by the museum's nonprofit foundation, the Illinois State Museum Society. What this means for me is that for 33 years I have had proven skill sets that meet the needs of outside funding entities. What this means for the State of Illinois is that the Museum Society is a successful private business partner of the state. The Museum Society has multiplied the effectiveness of the taxpayers' dollars by enhancing the museum's exhibits with an authenticity and accuracy gained from research funded by other entities. Through hard work and a standard for excellence, it has gained a respected standing among external funding agencies. This partnership between the state and the Museum Society is one in which the fruits of our labors truly have trickled down to everyone in our state, and even beyond our borders.

From the following examples of projects on which I have worked – all funded by entities other than the state of Illinois – you will see that the Illinois State Museum requires specialized workers who often need to be the proverbial Jack/Jill of all trades.

- As a teacher with the Museum Tech Academy, I was funded by the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This multi-year after-school program helped educate middle and high school students in STEM subjects in a way that was fun, yet required self-motivation on the part of the students.
- Commissioned by other museums, I have produced numerous fossil replicas of large Ice Age mammals (which require months to mold, cast, and paint). Replicas made in the Museum Casting Lab have educated and entertained visitors not only in our museum, but also in the Yukon, South Africa, Canada, Missouri, Indiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New York,

Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Texas. This summer, the Indiana State Museum and the Royal Alberta Museum in Edmonton, Canada, requested replicas. These jobs are contingent on the Illinois State Museum staying open.

- Donations from all over the state paid for me to replicate a skeleton of a Jefferson's Giant Ground Sloth (named for President Thomas Jefferson). This Ice Age mammal is displayed in the Changes! exhibition at the Illinois State Museum.
- I replicated fossils for the dig pit in the Mary Ann MacLean Play Museum, the special area for children that is located within the Illinois State Museum. "Digging" for fossils while playing paleontologist is one of our many popular activities in which kids learn and create while playing.
- The museum's long history of working in caves has led to requests for our expertise in analyzing paleontological and archaeological remains found in caves and rock shelters in Illinois, Missouri, South Dakota and Minnesota.
- I have identified bones from numerous prehistoric Native American sites in Illinois and surrounding areas. This work contributes to our knowledge about the prehistoric inhabitants of our state, helps us understand that prehistoric people successively interacted with a changing and often harsh environment, and promotes cultural diversity.
- Currently, I am funded by the National Science Foundation to contribute Illinois archaeological data to an international database called tDAR (the Digital Archaeological Record).

Although I list a few of my experiences, I know that other employees at the museum have contributed similarly to the state with their expertise on their particular projects. Clearly, the Illinois State Museum in Springfield, its five additional sites, and the nonprofit foundation provide taxpayers a lot of value for their \$6 million tax dollars. The museum and its nonprofit foundation provide a specialized and unique service to our citizens. They bring a positive international reputation to Illinois that cannot be bought – it has been hard-earned by successive generations of museum employees who built upon the work of those before, and who pass the baton onto the next.

The Illinois State Museum is unique – it is the only museum that focuses on the art, geology, archaeology and natural history of Illinois. The Illinois State Museum is an exemplary resource that should serve as a model. In short, the Illinois State Museum is a treasure that should be expanded, not eliminated. I respectfully ask the governor to keep the museum sites open so that current and future generations of museum employees can continue to safeguard Illinois' heritage, serve the citizens of Illinois with excellence, and build upon the Illinois State Museum's 138-year legacy.

Mona Colburn is a researcher for the Illinois State Museum Society.