

HM board chair outreach:

Brief notes from Informal Conversations, May 2025

From Esther Beth Sullivan, HM 2025 board chair

I was able to catch up with a majority of board members for informal conversations in the first weeks of May. Thanks to everyone who worked me into your very busy schedules! These are the notes I have from those conversations. Not surprisingly, many ideas echoed across conversations. There are some thoughts that I'm sure I've missed; apologies! Hopefully we will have the opportunity to continue these trains of thoughts in Helena.

What are opportunities for HM apart from its connection to NEH?

General Impressions:

- We do good work, we can do more good work; we have a year to think through our good work and reconfigure; that's an opportunity, and it's worth our time and attention.
- Prioritize and focus on the coming 12-18 months; plan hopefully for good outcomes and strategically for 'the pivot'; don't set up impossible goals or benchmarks that lead deterministically to a sense of disappointment.
- Given the current crisis, anything we do to maintain momentum is better than nothing.
- Our circle of influence is relatively small; use this time to consider how we got here given our 50+ year history; consider how we can become responsive to our state in new/expanded/accountable ways. Bring along potential advocates for the whole journey. "If you want me on the landing, be sure to include me on the take off."

Strategic Opportunities:

- HM can engage in more/better PR and outreach through local press; keep the name out there; keep programs in front of MT audiences/readers; develop a 'cheer-leader' base in local communities to 'talk up' HM activities; get Jill and other advocates on podcasts; we are fortunate to have board members with expertise in this area.
- Coordinate projects and outreach with other defunded or low-funded organizations in the state that have similar humanities-based missions; our expertise in technology systems such as Foundant and the development/donor tracking system, is an asset to other organizations.
- Continue to build on community connections through programs like Democracy Project; expand this program to involve adults and/or seniors in something like community history projects.
- Package speaker programs to match sponsor or foundation interests.
- Package speaker programs for 250th anniversary.
- Develop more online offerings from our speakers bureau; coordinate online delivery of programs in conjunction with other initiatives.

- Support and/or galvanize Montana authors *collectively*, to foster energy around local festivals, asking how MT writers develop a sense of place this place, how they write “for, by, near, and about” Montana; identifying the economic benefit of book festivals and book programs.
- Develop an online archive of Montana Poet Laureates; maintain a speaking program focused on the work of Montana Poet Laureates.
- Develop the Center for the Book as an umbrella for our multiple reading programs.
- “Sing our song in another way” – reuse some of our existing work in new packages that might attract foundation funding; cross-promote programs with other initiatives state-wide.

Development of Human and Financial Resources Opportunities:

- We had already begun the conversation to diversify our funding base, we can use that momentum to move forward.
- “Reel in a few people” for the board who really care and have financial means to help.
- Look for board members and advocates who can help us maintain authentic relations with the ‘majority voice’ in any given governmental administration; reconsider board make-up to align with elected administrations; we need a lot of friends no matter who’s in office.
- Identify ‘friends of HM’; educate friends and donors in order to retain interest.
- Strategically connect with foundations, particularly those located in Montana; collaborate with other MT organizations to attract foundation support for their dedicated interests.
- The 200K Mellon award gives us breathing room by supporting operations, with further benefit of 50K in potential matching funds; this provides operational support while we focus on building programs.

With or without NEH defunding, what challenges does HM face?

Fundraising challenges:

- For fundraising: people in Montana don’t know who we are or what we do; we don’t have staff or ‘man-power’ for fundraising; we are competing against bigger organizations that have significant fundraising operations and big targets; we need to support the people who do give to us and better educate them as to the value of our work and their contributions.
- Uncertainty of the funding environment (not just for HM and NEH) is profound; competition for donor dollars is significant in unprecedented ways with all the federal programs, grants, and research projects that have been cancelled.

Mission and operations challenges:

- The funding crisis means a loss of HM’s breadth of activities and programs; we won’t have the ability to do as much work in as many places.

- HM is not necessarily a well-known organization around the state despite sponsoring so many different programs; with our ability to fund programming mostly gone, it's more difficult to get our name and organization in front of people.
- In conversations, HM has had support from our current congressional delegation, but that support has not carried over to legislative actions or legislative support in the current administration; there is no state governmental support or state advocacy to intervene on behalf of HM.
- A lot is placed on the shoulders of the Executive Director to maintain the mission, operations, programs, finances . . . a lot!

Challenging questions that echo across conversations:

- Can HM exist only on donations and sponsored projects?
- What's the appropriate way to think about HM's ratio of administration costs to services or offerings? What's the best comparison? When we think of HM's administrative costs, are we like a library, a think tank, Red Cross, or some other kind of nonprofit?
- How do we grow HM away from the 90% risk (ie., NEH funding as the sole source of funding)?
- Humanities councils were born as mechanisms to funnel federal dollars in to states through state block grants. Do these councils have purposes without the charter of the NEH?

Priorities for the May 31st board meeting in Helena:

- Where dose HM go from here? What is the board role now?
- Provide an overview and talking points about current funding and finances
- Have fun thinking what to do next, all in the same room, developing a sense of adventure
- Identify short term goals; identify small projects and programs that have maximum visibility; what are opportunities for public events in combination with 'free press'
- Identify concrete ways that the board can be productive as volunteers
- Attend to the budget to ensure we are maximizing available funding to maintain small programs and visibility
- Set budget with knowledge of how the organization is maintained, at what levels, for how many months
- Maintain hopeful outlook, rather than planning for disappointment