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Wendler: Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum to Close Immediately Following State Fire Marshal Report

CANYON, Texas — Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum is closed to the public until further notice to address fire and life safety concerns, West Texas A&M University officials announced today.

WT President Walter V. Wendler made the decision to close the building following a recent inspection by the state fire marshal's office, which identified numerous and ongoing safety issues.

"We cannot ignore the seriousness of the fire and life safety risks posed by the existing museum buildings," Wendler said. "Since my arrival, I have been working to find solutions and address the ongoing challenges with the museum building. Unfortunately, we have not yet found a workable solution."

The violations pose significant safety risks and must be addressed promptly, said Chuck Allen, assistant state fire marshal.

"We have spoken with President Wendler about the ongoing violations and problems with the existing museum structures," Allen said. "President Wendler's decision to close the museum while corrective action is taken is in accordance with the State Fire Marshal's Office recommendation."

Some of the fire marshal's findings already have been corrected. However, other building issues will require substantial funding.

"The museum staff has worked diligently to address immediately solvable issues," said Heather Friemel, interim executive director of the Cultural Foundation of the Texas Panhandle, which oversees the museum under the umbrella of WT.

Other issues like sprinkling the facility, eliminating dead-end hallways and ensuring that all building areas have immediately accessible exits require more extensive and costly renovations to the facilities.

WT, which owns the buildings in which the Panhandle-Plains Historical Society's collection is displayed and stored, hired an engineering firm to present solutions and costs to address the fire marshal's report and other deferred maintenance issues. The total cost for needed renovations and repairs totaled almost \$100 million.

"At PPHM, the safety of our visitors, staff, and collections is our top priority," Friemel said. "While this shift requires some changes, our commitment to preserving and sharing the rich history of the Panhandle-Plains region remains steadfast. PPHM will continue to engage the community, including educational outreach to K-12 students using our portable planetarium, educational trunks and other innovative initiatives. Additionally, we will be expanding our creative programming, working to bring history and science beyond our walls with pop-up exhibitions and special installations that allow us to share the museum's stories in new and exciting ways."

Wendler has been proactive since he arrived at WT in 2016 in finding solutions to preserve and improve the museum, including seeking additional state funding. He established the Cultural Foundation of the Texas Panhandle in 2021 to enhance both the museum's and the "Texas" outdoor musical's standing across the state. Recently, Wendler secured funds from The Texas A&M University System Chancellor John Sharp to conduct a feasibility study for a new museum building which preserves the original Pioneer Hall building. Currently, the projected cost for a new facility is \$150 million. Attempts to secure the funds for museum facilities are continuing.

The University annually spends \$1.6 million to support the operation of the museum and facilities. Because the museum currently is not used as a University classroom facility, it does not generate state funding. For example, state funds were given for renovation of the Geneva Schaffer Education Building and Harrington Academic Hall WTAMU Amarillo Center, and the construction of Happy State Bank Academic Research Building because they are central to WT's educational mission.

"I plan to continue working with the Panhandle Plains Historical Society, the Texas Historical Commission, state representatives, local elected officials, donors and anyone else who is interested in and capable of assisting to preserve this essential Texas treasure," Wendler said. "Drawing on my decades of experience as a university administrator and professional architect, until a more permanent solution is found to address the challenges presented by the aging facility, I must take seriously the risk to human safety, as well as the safety of the priceless artifacts housed in the buildings."

CFTP Chair Mark Bivins said he would continue to work with Wendler to find ways to preserve the museum.

"President Wendler and I have and will continue to raise the concerns associated with the existing museum facilities by appealing to anyone and everyone who will listen," Bivins said. "We must preserve Texas' largest historical collection."

Since 1932, PPHM has preserved and showcased the rich history of Texas from its location on the WT campus in Canyon. The museum's collection includes more than 2 million artifacts and

is a vital educational resource for the Panhandle and beyond. The most recent renovations to the museum facilities occurred in 1983 with the addition of the derrick room and petroleum exhibits.

Serving the Texas Panhandle is the first maxim of the University's long-range plan, [**WT 125: From the Panhandle to the World.**](#)

That plan is fueled by the historic [**One West**](#) comprehensive fundraising campaign, which reached its initial \$125 million goal 18 months after publicly launching in September 2021. The campaign's new goal is to reach \$175 million by 2025; currently, it has raised more than \$160 million.

About West Texas A&M University

WT, a Regional Research University, is redefining excellence in Canyon, Texas, on a 342-acre residential campus, as well as the Harrington Academic Hall WTAMU Amarillo Center in downtown Amarillo. Established in 1910, the University has been part of The Texas A&M University System since 1990. WT, a Hispanic Serving Institution since 2016, boasts an enrollment of more than 9,000 and offers 66 undergraduate degree programs, including eight associate degrees; and 44 graduate degrees, including an integrated bachelor's and master's degree, a specialist degree and two doctoral degrees. The University is also home to the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum, the largest history museum in the state and the home of one of the Southwest's finest art collections. The Buffaloes are a member of the NCAA Division II Lone Star Conference and offers 14 men's and women's athletics programs.

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