

## **MEHER SPIRITUAL CENTER STRATEGIC PLAN**

### **ISSUES, GOALS, ACTION SCENARIOS, and ACTION PLANS** *(December 2009, revised October 2015)*

#### **PREAMBLE**

The Board of Directors of Meher Spiritual Center has been entrusted with the core responsibility to ensure the overall well-being and development of Meher Center in fulfillment of the charter that Meher Baba approved in 1959. In fulfilling this responsibility, the Board initiated a strategic planning process in early 2007.

A strategic plan is analogous to a road map that will lead an organization from where it is now to where it would like to be in a given number of years. It is the process of determining an organization's long-term goals and then identifying the best approach for achieving those goals.

#### **CORE PRINCIPLES OF THE PLAN:**

The Board identified three core principles that serve as the foundation for the strategic plan and the guiding force for the planning process:

1. The focus on Meher Baba is first and foremost. The Charter states that Meher Spiritual Center, Inc. is “devoted and dedicated to the name and spiritual purposes of Meher Baba, and to the dissemination of his teachings, without supplanting professed religious convictions or beliefs, but for the enhancement and strengthening of the spiritual life.”
2. Meher Baba says that service is “one of the watchwords of the spiritual life.” Service for Meher Baba is the intrinsic motivation of all work and offerings at Meher Center. Elizabeth Patterson, who Meher Baba sent from India to found Meher Center, said, “The real work of Meher Center is people.” Meher Center is Baba's Home where we have the opportunity to serve together for the enhancement and strengthening of the spiritual life through serving His guests and one another.
3. The strategic plan must reflect Meher Center's Charter as established by Meher Baba on November 10, 1959, and the Board Governance Document's interpretation of the Charter as stated in Meher Center's Corporation Ends (Goals):

**Ends:**

1. Ensure a retreat experience focused on Meher Baba, reflecting His directives that the retreat would be for rest, meditation and renewal of the spiritual life. The experience will be supported by:
  - a. Providing facilities, amenities, and conditions conducive to a retreat atmosphere dedicated to Meher Baba
  - b. Providing appropriate programs for overnight guests, day visitors, the Baba family, and youth
  - c. Ensuring preservation and maintenance of: places of special association with His visits to Meher Center (the Barn, Lagoon Cabin, and Baba's House - to remain unchanged in structure and use and in 100% repair “in as much as possible”, as per Meher Baba's wishes); Baba treasures and historical materials; grounds and structures; the natural quality of the environment, conducive to serving the purposes of Meher Center
2. Disseminate Baba's teaching through a publicly accessible library, programs at Meher Center, and other vehicles (e.g. web site)
3. Render service to others - the Corporation will implement or support programs that provide service to others, with particular attention to basic necessities for the poor and needy

**THE PLANNING PROCESS:**

For two years, the Meher Center's Board of Directors met with and gathered input from a wide range of sources including: Meher Center former board members, Meher Center staff, key committees, volunteers, and long-time associates of Meher Center. We received many letters and emails in response to the first request for input in the August 2007 newsletter, and over 500 responses to the strategic plan survey that went out to the Meher Center's mailing list in January 2008. Several open consultation meetings were held at Meher Center over a period of two years. In January 2009, a second survey was made available on the web site to give the broader Meher Center family another chance to comment on and give feedback about the more fully developed plan. This collective input and the Board's deliberations provided the basis for the strategic plan that follows.

Below are the strategic issues, goals, action scenarios, and action steps that have been identified and now finalized by the Board. Incorporation of all elements of the strategic plan into the Board Governance Policy assures that progress is monitored and that the plan will guide the preservation and development of Meher Center over the next ten years.

## **THE STRATEGIC PLAN**

### **ISSUE 1: Preservation of historical buildings and archival materials**

Meher Center is likely to face increasing stresses and challenges both to its property and to archival materials due to:

- Aging of buildings and structures
- Anticipated increase in usage by greater numbers of visitors
- Deterioration of archival materials entrusted to Meher Center's care

#### **Issue Description:**

All of the buildings on Meher Center, especially the original buildings that were used in Baba's time, face an ever-present challenge of preservation and maintenance due to their age and the constant, heavy use by increasing numbers of Meher Center visitors. Baba Himself stated that Baba's House, the Barn and the Lagoon Cabin, should be preserved as they originally were in His time, as much as it is practical. In addition, as time passes, the other buildings (such as the original Meher Center cabins) have now also taken on historic significance, requiring a significant level of attention.

Another critical challenge is the careful oversight and preservation of artifacts and historic materials belonging to Meher Center including: precious articles that Baba touched and used, films, recordings, photos, and documents.

#### **Goal:**

To protect Meher Center's physical property (structures, grounds, and archival materials) by:

- Minimizing fire and other safety hazards
- Protecting against aging, and natural deterioration of buildings and materials
- Ensuring appropriate utilization of facilities within Meher Center
- Ensuring careful and professional preservation of all artifacts and historic materials relating to Meher Baba

#### **Action Scenarios:**

1. Update overall assessment of integrity of Meher Center structures focusing particularly on the Barn, Baba's House and Lagoon Cabin, and implement short-term and long-term measures for their effective maintenance and protection.
2. Assess impact of increased usage of the three structures designated by Baba to be maintained as much as possible in their original form, and implement control policies as needed to ensure long-term preservation.
3. Ensure a current inventory of Baba's treasures and historic materials, and implement the most effective means for their preservation for the benefit of current and future generations.

**Action Steps:**

- Establish preservation/conservation policy. 2009
- Conduct assessment of current infrastructure; implement corrective measures as needed. 2010
- Establish ongoing infrastructure monitoring. 2011
- Computerize all maintenance records. 2012

**ISSUE 2: Environmental Management of the Center's Ecosystems****Issue Description:**

The Center is a functional ecosystem fragment of the Atlantic Coastal Forest ecoregion. It is composed of an intricate web of biotic relationships that include terrestrial and aquatic flora and fauna as well as, migratory avian species. The variety of habitats includes: intertidal zones, maritime forests, marshes, freshwater lakes and interdunal ponds fed by runoff and groundwater sources. The population of guests and visitors to the Center is transient; however the Center's use as a retreat, gathering and pilgrimage destination is continuous. Therefore, human use, the car and foot traffic inside the Center, the infrastructure, such as the septic system, are also part of the present day ecosystem. The Center is surrounded by commercial and suburban land use, with increasing exposure to vehicular traffic on its north-northwestern borders (US-17) and is experiencing impact from surface runoff and groundwater flow from adjacent areas.

The natural environment of the Center and the long term commitment of its stewards to its resilience and conservation require that decisions affecting the natural resources of the Center are made with an integrated and adaptive ecosystem management approach.

**Goal:**

To maintain, or restore if necessary, the resilience and health of the Center's natural ecosystems so that the unique atmosphere of the Center is protected, inasmuch as possible, given the dynamic nature of natural systems. To effectively and proactively manage human impact on these ecosystems in order to preserve the natural atmosphere of beauty and peace, as well as to provide for the safety of Center visitors and guests.

**Action Scenarios:**

Establish an ad hoc Board Environmental Management Committee (EMC) constituted of a team of advisors, staff and Board members to develop an environmental management plan for the Center's ecosystem.

**Action Steps:**

- Board: create a TOR and membership for an ad hoc Board Environmental Management Committee (EMC).
- Board: make changes to the Governance Document and Strategic Plan to clarify specific policies and strategies that apply to the Center's natural environment.
- EMC ; review current environmental policy, practice and conditions.
- EMC - create and Environmental Plan, with near term focus on lake and forest fire issues, as well as systems for sustaining the plan.
- EMC - explore compliance with all environmental laws and regulations, and recommend additional measures needed.
- EMC - explore and recommend supportive relationships that the Center could establish with helpful academic and conservation organizations.

**ISSUE 3: Accommodations**

More people want to come to Meher Center than the current facilities can physically accommodate without impacting the retreat atmosphere.

**Issue Description:**

It is anticipated that, given the history of Avataric advents in the past, a great number of people will be drawn to Him. Meher Baba said that Meher Center would one day become a place of pilgrimage. While the number of day and overnight visitors is gradually increasing, a clear tipping point has not yet been reached. However, at peak times, there are waiting lists and, at such times, the Meeting Place is also overcrowded.

Meher Center, therefore, is faced with the issue of demand exceeding carrying capacity, i.e., amount of activity that can take place in a space without impacting on the quality of the space. In other words, the challenge becomes finding ways to maintain the retreat atmosphere and preserve the physical property, while at the same time ensuring that the Meher Center is adequately prepared as it evolves into a place of world pilgrimage.

**Goal:**

To ensure continuing availability of the Meher Center to the increasing numbers of overnight guests, day visitors, and the nearby community, while maintaining conditions conducive to a retreat atmosphere dedicated to Meher Baba, and keeping the physical property in as natural a condition as practical.

**Action Scenarios:**

Create and implement an overall master plan (including locations, functions, types of buildings, number of buildings, parking, guest reception, and related needs) to make Meher Center available to more of His lovers and to those who want to know more about Meher Baba, in a way that:

- Maintains Meher Center as a place of pilgrimage
- Preserves the natural beauty of Meher Center
- Guides development of Meher Center as needs emerge, with the knowledge that there are limits to overall development.
- Uses creativity in meeting needs

**Action Steps:**

- Create a committee to perform a land-use/carrying capacity study of Meher Center property. 2009
- Based on the study, establish a master plan for development of Meher Center. 2010
- Implement and monitor the Master Plan.

**ISSUE 4: Programming**

Policies and administration regarding programs, activities, access to archival materials, use of internet and other technologies, and ways to engage in the life of Meher Center will need to be adjusted appropriately to reflect the changing needs and interests of Meher Center visitors and the Meher Baba family, while at the same time maintaining 100% focus on Meher Baba.

**Issue Description:**

Meher Center is witnessing not only increased numbers of visitors, but also an increase in the range of visitors' ages, nationalities, and cultures. These changes bring with them significant challenges and opportunities in the area of programming, offering a whole range of possibilities beyond the traditional Meher Center programs. Observing trends both at Meher Center and at Meherabad in India, it seems inevitable that the future will bring increased numbers of individuals of even more diverse backgrounds coming to learn about Avatar Meher Baba and to share experiences of Meher Baba and the spiritual life.

At the same time, it is of primary importance that all Meher Center offerings, whether it be a program already in place or a newly created program or activity, remain 100% focused on Meher Baba, His life and message, first and foremost.

**Goal:**

To evaluate and expand Meher Center's approach to programming and dissemination of information, guided by the changing needs and interests of people who come to Meher Center, while keeping 100% focus on Meher Baba.

**Action Scenarios:**

1. Develop a process that is open to a wide range of points of view for reviewing and ensuring vitality of Meher Center programs and activities.

2. Expand the number of both organized and informal group retreats and gatherings at Meher Center. These retreats and gatherings will be dedicated to Meher Baba and will be compatible with the individual retreat experience of others. All must be approved by the Board, considered on a case by case basis, and whether occurring once or on an ongoing basis, must be appropriate for Meher Baba's Home in the West.
3. Expand access to archival material while maintaining responsible preservation standards.
4. Expand the use of technology to enrich and facilitate dissemination of Meher Baba's message while maintaining the retreat atmosphere and intimacy of Meher Center programs and activities, and protecting the integrity of Meher Center's media collection.

**Action Steps:**

- Form a committee to periodically review and make recommendations about programming. 2009.
- Review and adjust policy and other requirements (facilities, etc.) to accommodate more group gatherings. 2009
- Conduct periodic evaluation of group gatherings and make appropriate adjustments.
- Establish goals and policy in relation to dissemination of Meher Baba's message, including use of archival materials. 2009
- Form a committee to develop a dissemination strategy, and implement. 2010

**ISSUE 5: Involvement of the Meher Baba Community**

There are many unrealized opportunities to include and maximize the involvement of the Meher Baba family in providing resources and support to Meher Center's leadership and management in its role of guiding Meher Center's current and future operations. The commitment to this open communication process represents a significant cultural change in how Meher Center operates.

**Issue Description:**

It is anticipated that, as time passes and the Meher Baba family served by Meher Center expands, new challenges and opportunities will arise on many fronts. These opportunities and challenges will increasingly need the collective wisdom of the Meher Baba family as well as its active support.

Currently Meher Center leadership functions under a governance policy that has been designed to ensure that there is vital decision making and ongoing self-evaluation at the Board level. Therefore, it is essential that the Board's decision making process and visioning for the future be informed and supported by the involvement of the larger Baba family at various levels. This commitment to actively engage and use resources of the Meher Baba family to help inform the decision making of the Board represents a significant and substantive shift in the way Meher Center has operated relative to the overall Baba family at large. Naturally, this same shift in approach will also need to be reflected in the management of Meher Center operations as well

**Goal:**

To ensure significant opportunities for communication between the Meher Baba family and leadership at all levels, (including Board members, management, staff, and Board committees) to provide for informed decision making on behalf of Meher Center.

**Action Scenarios:**

1. Develop more effective systems for receiving regular feedback from guests at Meher Center
2. Create regular opportunities for communication between the Board, staff, and committees
3. Create opportunities for direct interaction (formal or informal) between the Board and the Meher Baba family

**Action Steps:**

- Revise/design and implement systems for guest feedback. 2009
- Plan and conduct regular meetings between Board and staff. 2009
- Create a system by which Board receives input on specific agenda issues from staff, committees, volunteers, nearby community, and other resource people. 2009
- Create a Board e-mail address for direct communication with the Board. 2009
- Design a system for getting input from the Meher Baba family on a regular basis. 2009

**ISSUE 6: Staffing**

Recognizing that the Meher Baba family is made up of many talented and motivated people who wish to serve in Baba's work, this service potential could be tapped and more fully utilized to enable Meher Center to maintain and expand its functions in order to fulfill its mission.

**Issue Description:**

Meher Center currently relies on the performance of fifteen paid staff to perform the key functions of maintaining and fulfilling its mission, many of whom will be retiring over the next ten years. In addition, Meher Center relies on the support of more than 150 volunteers who contribute their time and talent to the organization.

There is, therefore, a need to examine and determine the financial sustainability and efficacy of the current staffing model, both in light of the imminent retirement of some staff and the current economic uncertainty facing the country. The intent would be that the new staffing model would include increased reliance on volunteers to help meet the challenges facing Meher Center, now and in the future.

There is a growing pool of volunteers, both in the nearby community and afar, who, inspired by Beloved Baba's example of service, are deeply committed to His Home in the West and are eager to offer their talents and time to serve Meher Center.



There are also growing possibilities for participation from a distance through the use of internet technology, involvement in specific projects, and periodic work visits. Perhaps most importantly for the future, there is an increasing number of the younger generation who have expressed an interest in serving in some capacity. Given these trends, there is a clear opportunity to increase the reliance on volunteer workers.

**Goal:**

To maximize the talents and dedication within the broader Meher Baba family and make the best use of Meher Center human resources, by increasing the reliance upon and effective utilization of volunteers who have appropriate levels of commitment and skills.

**Action Scenarios:**

1. Implement a new staffing model that includes increased reliance on volunteer workers to make Meher Center operations more sustainable. This new model would also include:
  - Providing opportunities to volunteer both for those in the local community and beyond.
  - Increasing communication about opportunities to participate and contribute ideas
  - Creating structure that provides support, orientation, training, and clearly defined authority for volunteers so they are fully equipped to contribute to Meher Center's mission
2. Identify and make use of relevant skills that members of the Meher Baba family would like to offer on behalf of Meher Center.
3. Identify and implement opportunities for volunteers to serve others in the greater Myrtle Beach community, and beyond.

**Action Steps:**

- Review and refine staffing model and recruitment plan. 2009
- Reform volunteer council and create volunteer coordinator position. 2010
- Establish structure and systems for volunteer participation, training and support. 2010

**ISSUE 7: Relationship with the Larger Community**

Meher Center is likely to face continuing and increased developmental and legal challenges, and will need to rely on strong and supportive relationships with key decision makers and other influential individuals and groups in nearby communities, including at local, city, county, state and national levels.

**Issue Description:**

Meher Center is an oasis of pristine oceanfront undeveloped land in the midst of burgeoning and intense coastal development and rising real estate values. As a nonprofit organization, Meher Center has acquired tax exemption privileges in accordance with State and Federal laws

Given the extraordinary growth pattern of the Myrtle Beach economy, it is essential to develop and implement a strategy to strengthen relationships with key decision makers in nearby communities, Horry County, and South Carolina in order to obtain their support and convey to them the value of Meher Center as a unique asset. Furthermore, the legal contexts that protect Meher Center from taxation, encroachment, eminent domain for public access roads, etc. are always changing. Meher Center must keep alert to changes and trends that might affect its tax status or the ways that it functions.

**Goal:**

To ensure that Meher Center is strengthened and protected by building good relationships with the surrounding community.

**Action Scenario:**

1. Monitor and act upon key information and developments at local, state and federal levels.
2. Foster positive relationships with individuals, groups and organizations within the local community and beyond, whose support is important to Meher Center.

**Action Steps:**

- Determine what needs to be monitored, establish a monitoring committee and a monitoring system. 2009
- Identify key external individuals, groups and organizations whose support is important to Meher Center. 2010
- Establish an External Relations Committee. 2010
- Review current external relations and develop proactive external relations plan. 2010

**ISSUE 8: Financial Resources**

Meher Center at present does not have an adequate and sustainable base of financial support to provide for its annual budget and to support its future plans and activities.

**Issue Description:**

The issues facing Meher Center, as well as the goals established to deal with these issues and the action plans that are developed, will require increased financial support. There has been a history within Meher Center of keeping the fund-raising activities relatively limited. There is a regular donor base, but this is not sufficient to meet current and projected needs. Further, given the evolving economic scenario (exacerbated by the current economic instability), there is a greater need for all of us within the Meher Baba community to accept a higher level of responsibility for the financial well-being of Meher Center. There is also a need for more effective communication between Meher Center and the community as to Meher Center's needs and how its resources are managed. Looking to its long-term mission of being a place of pilgrimage for all time, Meher Center will require a larger endowment, increased donor support, increased revenues, and the most efficient stewardship of its resources.

**Goal:**

To ensure Meher Center's financial stability to meet current and future needs.

**Action Scenarios:**

1. Fully implement a fund-raising effort that will include:
  - Regularly communicating with the entire Meher Baba community regarding the Center's ongoing budgetary needs.
  - Cultivating long-term relationships with larger donors
  - Conducting an Endowment campaign.
  - Conducting a capital campaign (as required by Meher Center's expansion)
  - Incorporating a small gift, gift-in-kind donation, and planned giving plan
  - Coordinating Meher Center's fund-raising activities with similar activities conducted by other Baba groups for mutual benefit.
2. Strengthen the oversight of financial investment and financial/resource management to enhance board decision-making and communication with the overall Meher Baba community.

**Action Steps:**

- Set fundraising policy and goals. 2009
- Create fundraising committee. 2009
- Establish fundraising plan. 2009
- Implement and monitor fundraising plan. 2010
- Review current investment and financial management practices. 2009
- Establish, implement and monitor a Meher Center Financial Policy. 2009