

MEHER SPIRITUAL CENTER STRATEGIC PLANNING

ISSUES, GOALS, AND ACTION SCENARIOS

December, 2008

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 the 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. The Meher Center Board's current strategic planning effort is expected to be completed in 2009, and it will guide the development and preservation of Meher Center over the next ten years.

CORE PRINCIPLES OF THE PLAN:

The Board has 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 Baba is the intrinsic motivation of all work and offerings at Meher Center. Elizabeth Patterson, who Meher Baba sent from India to found the Center, said, “The real work of the 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 the 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 the Center

2. Disseminate Baba's teaching through a publicly accessible library, programs in the 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

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT AND WHAT WE ASK OF YOU

To date, the Meher Center's Board has met with and gathered input from a number of sources including: Meher Center Emeritus Board members, Meher Center staff, key committees, volunteers, and long-time associates of the Center. We received many letters and emails in response to our request for input in the August 2007 newsletter, and we received over 500 responses to the strategic plan survey that went out to the Center's mailing list in January 2008. Also, several open meetings have been held at the Center, including one with young adults. This collective input provided a basis for the document that follows.

This document contains the primary strategic issues and goals identified and finalized by the Board. In addition, it now contains action scenarios—directional guidance for the formation of concrete action plans to address each issue and achieve each goal. The Board is again asking for your input and feedback at this critical stage. Please review the action scenarios carefully. Do they set clear direction? Do they address each issue? And will they help to achieve each goal?

Also, we ask that you think about and offer us any specific ideas you might have for action plans that follow the action scenarios. And most importantly, if you have expertise in an area that you can offer to help create and implement the final action plans, please be in touch.

To access the new survey, simply click the survey button on the home page of the Center's website. You can also request a paper copy by calling 843-272-8793 or emailing mdilruba@aol.com.

Two open strategic planning meetings with the Board of Directors are scheduled during the holidays — December 27 and 30, 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon, at the Center's Meeting Place. These are gatherings to find out more about the Board's planning effort and to offer all who are interested and able to come, another opportunity to give feedback.

ISSUES, GOALS, AND ACTION SCENARIOS **December, 2008**

ISSUE 1: Preservation

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

- Environmental changes—natural and man-made
- Aging of buildings and structures
- Anticipated increase in usage by greater numbers of visitors
- Deterioration of archival materials entrusted to the Center's care

Issue Description:

Meher Center faces an ongoing challenge to the health of its fragile natural environment due to potential natural disasters as well as man-made environmental disturbances, both from within Meher Center property and from without. Some of these challenges include the encroaching deer population, invasive plant species, air pollution, disturbances to the water table levels as well as water quality, increase in outside noise and light levels, and continued threats of fire requiring the maintenance and expansion of fire safety roads and fire breaks.

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 the 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
- Minimizing environmental stresses
- Mitigating impact of development of surrounding properties
- Ensuring appropriate utilization of facilities within the Center
- Ensuring careful and professional preservation of all artifacts and historic materials relating to Meher Baba

Action Scenarios:

1. Update and undertake environmental studies to identify major stress factors and trends, and implement ongoing management responses to maintain as much as possible the integrity of the natural environment
2. Update overall assessment of integrity of 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
3. 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
4. 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

ISSUE 2: 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 the 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.

The 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 Scenario:

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

- Maintains the Center as a place of pilgrimage
- Preserves the natural beauty of the Center
- Guides development of the Center as needs emerge
- Uses creativity in meeting needs

ISSUE 3: 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 the 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 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 the Center's approach to programming and dissemination of information, guided by the changing needs and interests of people who are drawn to Meher Center, while keeping 100% focus on Meher Baba.

Action Scenarios:

1. Expand both organized and informal group retreats and gatherings at the 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.
2. Expand access to archival material while maintaining responsible preservation standards.
3. Expand the use of technology to enrich and facilitate dissemination of Meher Baba's message while maintaining the retreat atmosphere and intimacy of Center programs and activities, and protecting the integrity of the Center's media collection.
4. Develop a mechanism for ongoing review of Center programs and activities, and a consistent process for gathering input and feedback.

ISSUE 4: 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 the 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 the Center operates.

Issue Description:

It is anticipated that, as time passes and the 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 the 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 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 the Center.

Action Scenarios:

1. Develop more effective systems for receiving regular feedback from guests on the Center
2. Periodically survey the Baba family to get their input and feedback on key Center issues and plans
3. Create regular opportunities for communication between the Board, staff, and committees
4. Create opportunities for direct interaction (formal or informal) between the Board and the Baba family
5. Identify and make use of relevant skills that members of the Baba family would like to offer on behalf of the Center

ISSUE 5: 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 Spiritual Center, Inc., 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, the 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 the 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 Center human resources, by increasing the reliance upon and effective utilization of volunteers who have appropriate levels of commitment and continuity.

Action Scenarios:

1. Implement a new staffing model to make Center operations more financially sustainable by increasing the reliance on volunteer workers for all aspects of Meher Center operations. This new model would also include:
 - Providing opportunities for service in both 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 the Center's mission
2. Identify and implement opportunities for volunteers to serve others in the greater Myrtle Beach community, and beyond.

ISSUE 6: 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 protected from outside or legal actions that would undermine its integrity and mission; and to build supportive relationships which would enhance the Center's operation and mission.

Action Scenario:

Create a formal committee or system to gather and monitor key information and developments surrounding the Center, encompassing both governmental and nongovernmental dimensions. This system will ensure that essential relationships are developed, key information is tracked and acted upon, and that there is effective coordination with other key committees and individuals within the Center.

ISSUE 7: 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. In addition, there are current strains on Meher Center's annual budget, which are likely to increase.

The Board is committed to keeping cabin fees low. At this time, Meher Center has a limited fundraising plan that relies primarily on its annual newsletter requesting donations. Meher Center has a regular donor base that contributes significantly, but this is not a large number of people. As operating expenses increase and the future needs become substantial, the necessity for additional income from donations is clear.

Goal:

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

Action Scenario:

Fully implement the fund-raising committee with a strategy that will include:

- Cultivating long-term relationships with larger donors
- Conducting a capital campaign (as required by the Center's expansion)
- Incorporating a small gift, gift-in-kind donation, and planned giving plan
- Coordinating the Center's fund-raising activities with similar activities conducted by other Baba groups for mutual benefit.