

Executive Summary

In August 2025, Naper Settlement convened key stakeholders across two days for interactive workshops and sent out follow up surveys. The purpose was to gain their insight to help shape the institution's strategic direction for the next 10-15 years. Through collaborative exercises, participants provided clear guidance on priorities, concerns, and their vision for the future.

Top Three Priorities

Preserve and Enhance Educational Experiences - Overwhelming support for interpretive and participatory exhibits that maintain hands-on, authentic engagement

Expand Year-Round Programming - Strong enthusiasm for seasonal celebrations, winter activities, concerts, and event facilities that activate the site beyond traditional hours

Improve Access and Infrastructure - Consistent emphasis on addressing parking, wayfinding, entrance experience, and creating affordable meeting spaces

Clear Mandate

Stakeholders envision Naper Settlement as a dynamic, evolving destination that honors its historical roots while serving as a vibrant, community hub. The feedback reveals strong support for growth—provided it maintains authenticity, hands-on experiences, and connection to local stories.

Critical Challenges to Address

- Parking and accessibility barriers
- Limited visibility and wayfinding
- Need for affordable community meeting spaces
- Balance between preservation and innovation
- Infrastructure improvements as foundation for programmatic growth

The Naper Settlement
Long Range Site
Development Plan is a
visionary roadmap for
the museum's future
growth, enhancement,
and community impact.

Naper Settlement has served over 7.2 million visitors since the Naperville Heritage Society's involvement, establishing itself as a cornerstone of Naperville and the Chicago metro population area's cultural and educational landscape. As the institution looks toward its next chapter, leadership recognized the need for a comprehensive planning process to guide decisions about programs, facilities, and community impact through 2035-2040.

Why Now?

Several factors prompted this strategic planning effort:

Changing Visitor Expectations: Modern audiences seek interactive, immersive experiences rather than passive viewing

Year-Round Activation: Opportunity to expand beyond peak season and become a four-season destination

Infrastructure Needs: Aging facilities and site challenges require strategic investment

Community Growth: Naperville's evolution creates new opportunities for partnerships and programming

Competitive Landscape: Regional cultural institutions are innovating—Naper Settlement must remain relevant

Preservation Mission: Need to balance historical integrity with contemporary engagement methods



Who Participated

The workshops engaged participants representing diverse perspectives within the Naperville community, spanning historical preservation, educational programming, community development, and cultural engagement perspectives, participants also included long time residents as well as newcomers to the city. This breadth of representation was intentional, reflecting Naper Settlement's commitment to serving as a community resource for all Napervillians that resonates across generations and interests.

- Community leaders and civic representatives
- Historical society members and preservation advocates
- Educational partners and youth program coordinators
- Local business and cultural organization representatives
- Long-time supporters and donors
- Museum staff and board members
- Neighborhood and community association representatives
- Multi-generational Napervillians and recent residents

Workshop Objectives

The August 5-6, 2025 workshops were designed to:

- Understand what stakeholders value and want to preserve
- Identify gaps, challenges, and improvement opportunities
- Gauge interest in potential new facilities and programming
- Define the qualities and characteristics stakeholders envision for Naper Settlement's future
- Build shared understanding of priorities to guide planning decisions

Workshop Structure

Structure: Small-group collaborative workshops with hands-on activities

Duration: Two full-day sessions (August 5-6, 2025)

Setting: Naper Settlement campus to allow firsthand experience

Follow-up: Online survey for additional detailed feedback

Goals Activity

Each table received a printout and participants were invited to think about the current conditions of Naper Settlement. Stakeholders wrote and placed post-its on four sections of the printout:

What we like and want to keep, What we like but don't have, What we have but don't want, and What we don't want and fear getting. The overwhelming emphasis on preserving historic authenticity and hands-on experiences provides clear guidance for future development:

Non-negotiables: Any new facilities or programs must respect historical integrity and maintain tactile, participatory engagement

Core Identity: Stakeholders view Naper Settlement's unique value as the combination of authentic preservation + interactive programming + community gathering hub.

Risk Management: Changes perceived as "generic" or that eliminate hands-on experiences will face resistance

WHAT WE LIKE AND WANT TO KEEP		WHAT WE LIKE BUT DON'T HAVE	
THEMES Historic charm Family friendly programming Youth engagement Walkable experience	<p>"THE YOUTH PROGRAMMING IS AMAZING"</p> <p>"HISTORY - SEEING IT IN PERSON IS POWERFUL!"</p> <p>"FAMILY HISTORY INVOLVED IN NAPER SETTLEMENT"</p> <p>"WALKABILITY OF THE MUSEUM AND VILLAGE"</p>	THEMES Sensory experiences Affordable meeting spaces Cultural programming Food/dining options	<p>"Reasonably priced public meeting rooms"</p> <p>"More cultural programming aimed at young adults"</p> <p>"A cafe where people can sit and eat and a gift shop"</p> <p>"Messaging and awareness are needed"</p>
WHAT WE HAVE BUT DON'T WANT		WHAT WE DON'T WANT AND FEAR GETTING	
THEMES Parking challenges Accessibility barriers Entry/wayfinding issues	<p>"HISTORICAL BUILDINGS THE PUBLIC CANNOT ENTER"</p> <p>"PARKING IS CHALLENGING"</p> <p>"THINK ABOUT ENTRANCES AND PEDESTRIAN EXPERIENCE"</p> <p>"FENCE AROUND THE PARK, IT USED TO BE MORE OPEN WHICH WAS NICE"</p>	THEMES Loss of authenticity Community disconnection Loss of hands-on experiences	<p>"GENERIC EXHIBITS THAT LACK LOCAL TIES OR STORIES"</p> <p>"GETTING AWAY FROM THE TACTICAL EXPERIENCE WITH YOUR HANDS - PRESERVE THIS!"</p> <p>"BEING CUT OFF FROM OTHER COMMUNITY GROUNDS AND INSULATED IN A BUBBLE"</p> <p>"DON'T LOSE TRACK OF THE FACT THIS WAS A GIFT. HONOR THE INTENT"</p>

Positioning Activity

In this activity, participants were asked to imagine Naper Settlement in the future as if it had fully achieved their ideal vision. They then shared the words and phrases they would use to describe that future, revealing the qualities and values they hope the site will embody in the years to come.

There was a strong desire to strike a balance between honoring rich historical roots and embracing innovation and change. Words like history, story, and historical were among the most frequently mentioned, reflecting the importance participants placed on maintaining the site's role as a storyteller and steward of

the past. At the same time, words such as evolving, innovating, and contemporary highlight an eagerness to adapt and grow in ways that remain relevant and engaging for future generations.

Participants also emphasized the values of fun, joy, and family-friendliness, pointing to a vision of Naper Settlement as a welcoming place where everyone can learn and enjoy meaningful experiences together. The responses reveal a vision for Naper Settlement as a dynamic, evolving destination that celebrates the past while inspiring and connecting people in the present and future.



Key Takeaways

Participants expressed strong support for growth and enhancement, with overwhelming consensus for educational programming, interpretive experiences, and year-round activation. The tone was decidedly forward-looking while remaining grounded in respect for Naper Settlement's historical mission.



Areas of Strong Consensus

Preserve and Enhance

Universal agreement on maintaining historic charm, hands-on experiences, and family-friendly programming as core institutional values. This includes a clear mandate for educational initiatives: Interpretive exhibits, participatory programming, and indoor exhibit space are top priorities.

Expand Access

Strong desire for improved accessibility, better wayfinding, enhanced parking solutions, and more welcoming entry experiences.

Ensure Year-Round Programming

Enthusiastic support for seasonal celebrations, winter activities, and four-season event facilities.

Foster Community Connection

Clear emphasis on positioning Naper Settlement as an integrated community hub rather than an isolated historical site. Outdoor pavilion and meeting/conference rooms strongly endorsed—BUT need attention to community affordability.

Prioritize Infrastructure

Landscaping, seating, and public space improvements received strong support.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

The workshop findings reveal several critical insights that should guide long-range planning:

Dual Identity Opportunity

Stakeholders envision Naper Settlement successfully serving as both a premier historical institution AND a vibrant community gathering space. These roles are viewed as complementary rather than competing.

Experience-Centered Development

The strongest support was for participatory, interpretive, and immersive experiences rather than passive viewing. This suggests investment in engagement-focused facilities and programming will resonate with community needs.

Infrastructure as Enabler

While programming generates enthusiasm, stakeholders consistently identified infrastructure improvements (parking, wayfinding, accessibility, meeting spaces) as prerequisites for realizing programmatic ambitions.

Authenticity + Innovation Balance

The word cloud from the positioning exercise powerfully illustrates stakeholder desire to honor history while embracing contemporary approaches—suggesting success will come from “both/and” rather than “either/or” thinking.

An Exciting Future

Naper Settlement stands at a pivotal moment. With strong community support, clear strategic priorities, and commitment to both preservation and innovation, the institution is poised to expand its impact while remaining true to its core mission.

The next ten to fifteen years will transform Naper Settlement into an even more vibrant destination—a place where history comes alive through authentic experiences; where community gathers for learning and celebration; and where every visitor feels welcomed, engaged, and inspired. **This is the vision stakeholders have articulated.**