

Interview with Belinda Basso

“Whether the Village Trustees would have voted in favor or against the proposal, as a Frankfort resident, I am deeply disappointed that the Trustees were not made aware of, nor given the opportunity to opine on, the absorption of the museum. Adding a \$250k+ net revenue stream for Frankfort, in addition to the many other positive impacts, would be something the Trustees should have been apprised of.” -Belinda Basso

For years, Frankfort's beloved KidsWork Children's Museum — a vibrant hub that draws up to 40,000 visitors annually to the village's historic downtown — quietly lobbied Mayor Keith Ogle and the village administrator to be absorbed as a municipal entity. Far from seeking a handout, the museum, a proven revenue-generating nonprofit, offered to become a financially self-sustaining asset to the village — bringing not only cultural value but net income into Frankfort's coffers. Despite repeated appeals and meetings from 2018 to 2023, museum leadership never got a hearing before the village's Board of Trustees. The mayor kept the museum's proposal from ever reaching the board, leaving both the museum and the trustees in the dark until it was too late.

Now, Frankfort's loss has become New Lenox's gain. After hearing of the museum's struggles secondhand, New Lenox Mayor Tim Baldermann reached out directly to KidsWork leadership with a stunning unsolicited offer: a brand new, purpose-built 12,000 square foot facility and a formal relationship that could ensure the museum's long-term stability and growth. As Frankfort trustees — outraged they were never informed — scramble to make sense of how this cultural cornerstone slipped away, the museum's quiet struggle reveals troubling questions about transparency, governance, and missed opportunities to invest in the future of Frankfort's downtown economy and family life.

This piece will explore the full timeline of the museum's unheeded request, the stakes for the Frankfort community, and the behind-the-scenes breakdown in leadership that may have permanently changed the cultural landscape of the village.

Below is Belinda Basso's chronology of events:

I, museum Board President, and the Executive Director met with the mayor and village administrator numerous times from 2018-2023. The meetings were generally designed to convince the mayor(s) to absorb the museum into the village. The Village declined and recommended we approach both Frankfort and Frankfort Square Park Districts. The museum approached both park districts (Frankfort's park district several times over the same number of years), but both declined due to issues within the park districts' infrastructures.

Before continuing the saga, there are a few important background points. Each of these were made by Belinda at the meetings:

1. Most children's museums are housed under municipalities.

2. From 2020 on, the museum brought in \$250k - 325k in net profit annually (fundraising and fees). It paid for itself. The “ask” to the mayor and village administrator was never financial support or new building, etc. In fact, it was the opposite. The museum would be a net income generating line item in the village’s coffers.

3. The museum registered approximately 35-40,000 visits per year into downtown Frankfort and only half of them were from nearby towns. Anecdotally, the knock-on effect to downtown businesses was meaningful. Why was the museum seeking to be absorbed?

1. The museum has one full-time employee, the Executive Director, that runs the operation. This person does not receive any benefits (health insurance, retirement, etc.). Offering benefits was a key consideration in the ability to attract quality candidates for the position. If the museum was absorbed by a municipality the Executive Director could presumably be eligible for benefits per the municipality’s plan.

2. Beside the Executive Director, the museum was governed by an all-volunteer board. The museum’s steady growth warranted a more resilient and sustainable governing body (i.e., there would be inevitable turnover on the board).

3. During and after the pandemic the benefits to the museum of potentially being absorbed grew. The extreme environment introduced by the pandemic came dangerously close to shuttering the museum (the museum was not allowed to be open for a long time during the pandemic). But it DID survive.

Back to the chronology of the story: On the heels of the pandemic, Belinda’s urgency to continue to push the mayor grew. A New Lenox village employee was also on the museum board and would hear Belinda report back to the museum board that Belinda’s requests to the mayor were seemingly falling on deaf ears. We believe the museum board member told the New Lenox mayor (Baldermann) of the situation. Baldermann, unsolicited by Belinda and unsolicited by anyone acting officially on behalf of the museum, reached out to Belinda and made an eye-popping offer to the museum. Again, importantly, there was never an ask that included new facilities or exhibits. And, importantly, there was never any proactive action from Belinda or anyone acting in an official capacity for the board to shop the museum to other cities.

Unbeknown to Belinda, the 5-6 conversations Belinda had over a 5-year period with mayor and village administrator never went beyond the mayor or village administrator’s desk. Neither person ever brought the matter to the board of trustees for deliberation/advice.

The Board of Trustees were apparently outraged over never being told (by the mayor or village administrator) that the museum was trying to get on the village’s agenda. Several trustees contacted Belinda directly to express their concern. Belinda did not know (had no way of knowing) that the mayor and village administrator never included others in the information flow on the museum. By the time the trustees found out, it was already too late. New Lenox had made an offer that Frankfort stated - after the fact - that they would never have matched, including a new dedicated 12,000 square foot facility solely for the museum.

