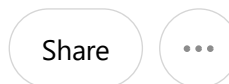
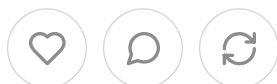


# A new leader for a museum in transition

Plus: Big money pours into south Charlotte council race + CMS bond campaign; Will CLT ever get Clear?; LendingTree details job cuts; Ledger rolls out signs at polling places; No more elevator photos

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*Good morning! Today is Wednesday, November 1, 2023. You're reading The Charlotte Ledger, an e-newsletter with local business-y news and insights for Charlotte, N.C. This post is sent to paying subscribers only.*

Today's Charlotte Ledger is sponsored by [Cookin' | Blumenthal Performing Arts](#) ([blumenthalarts.org](#)). With a crazy deadline looming near, four frenzied chefs turn their kitchen into a dynamic, veggies-flying-everywhere performance as Korean samulnori drumming and martial arts take center stage.



## Interview: Richard Cooper arrives ready to guide the Levine



**Richard Cooper is only the third person to serve as CEO for the Levine Museum of the New South. Emily Zimmern held the position for 20 years starting in 1995, followed by Kathryn Hill, who served from 2016 to 2022. (Michael J. Solender)**

*by Michael J. Solender*

Richard Cooper stood outside the Levine Museum of the New South's temporary home at 401 S. Tryon on a sunny, early October morning waiting for a staff member with keys to let him in.

Cooper, the Levine Museum's newly appointed president and CEO, was just two weeks into the job, and was shuttling between this gallery, the museum's administrative space at Charlotte's VAPA (Visual and Performing Arts) Center, and the offices of municipal, nonprofit and educational leaders. He's on a listening tour to learn more about Charlotte's cultural landscape and help frame how the museum can best deliver upon its mission of "connecting the past to the future to realize the promises of a New South."

He comes to Charlotte from the **Conner Prairie Museum** outside of Indianapolis, Ind., where he served as vice president and chief programs officer. Previously, Cooper worked as director of museum experiences at the **National Underground Railroad Freedom Center** in his hometown of Cincinnati. He is a national authority on interpreting the history of American slavery and the underground railroad and speaks widely on topics of diversity and inclusion and community engagement.

Cooper joins the Levine at a pivotal transition point for the institution. He is just the third CEO since the museum's founding in 1991, and his arrival comes just 18 months after the museum [sold its building](#) on 7th and College streets in uptown to New York developers for \$10.75M.

When the building sale was announced last March, museum leaders said the money from the sale would enable it to fulfill its mission “in a newer, more flexible space, and to invest in creating robust digital experiences.”

It was a concerning shift for many in Charlotte who had come to view the museum as a cultural institution uniquely positioned to serve an increasingly diverse community. Exhibits such as the award-winning “Cottonfields to Skyscrapers: Reinventing Charlotte and the Carolina Piedmont in the New South,” “Courage: the Carolina Story that Changed America” and “K(NO)W JUSTICE K(NO)W PEACE” fueled community discussion and engagement around community values, power structures, race, education and socioeconomics.

But museum attendance was declining even before the pandemic, and Covid only made things worse. (In 2019, attendance was reported to be 40,000 — which is considered low for a museum its size.)

Now, with a newly debt-free balance sheet after the building sale, a full-time staff of 19, and an annual budget of more than \$2M, the Levine Museum is in the process of a post-Covid reboot, with Cooper tapped to lead the institution into its next phase.

The museum currently occupies a small exhibition space of about 6,000 s.f. (compared with the 40,000 s.f. it occupied at 7th and College streets) at Three Wells Fargo Center, where public admission to rotating exhibits is free. The space is provided at no cost to

the museum for a three-year period while the institution seeks a new home. An announcement about where the new location will be is expected this spring.

**Priya Sircar**, who leads the arts and culture planning process for Charlotte as the city's appointed arts and culture officer, calls the Levine Museum "one of the anchor cultural organizations in Charlotte."

"It is unique in the arts and cultural landscape as it is known for bringing together community members from different walks of life for difficult conversations. They've used exhibitions and local and national experts to shed light on topics that are of great relevance to our everyday life. I'm excited to see Rich here and look forward to working with him and the Levine."

We sat down with Cooper on that sunny October morning to hear his observations on the role of the Levine Museum as a cultural conversation place, the opportunities for balancing digital and in-person experiences and what the community can expect from the Levine Museum in the future.

Here are his thoughts on a variety of topics, lightly edited for brevity and clarity:

**What he's most eager to dive into:** The most exciting piece for me is we need places like museums and cultural organizations to have [civic] conversations. The American Alliance of Museums has done several studies that show museums are more trusted than librarians, teachers and news agencies. That gives us as museums the obligation to make sure we're helping educate the public on civic dialogue and creating space for conversations around these issues to help bring the community together. That's what excites me the most.

When I started looking at it and diving into the opportunity here, I came to understand the Levine needs to be a beacon of education, empathy, and engagement. These three terms need to be a critical part of the work we're doing and the stories we tell as a museum.

We need to look at the history of Charlotte in the region and explore how that tells the story of Southern cities and the developments of the South. We need to look at the challenges and opportunities inside those stories and use Charlotte to explore stories

[surrounding] race, income, LGBTQ history, gentrification and other important issues.

**New things coming up:** We have three major projects we're working on right now. We're building a new history exhibit that'll open this coming spring, which we'll be sharing more information [on] soon.

"50 places in Charlotte" is an online, digital project we're working on. We currently have more than a dozen places identified. These will come out on a weekly basis once the project launches. This is an innovative experience where we'll bring the stories of these 50 places [significant to Charlotte's development] to life. It'll let us use social media and other digital platforms in ways that appeal to younger and more diverse audiences.

We're working on a podcast that centers on Charlotte's challenges, opportunities, and accomplishments, alongside other Southern cities. The podcast is a series of 10 episodes. Look for more information on that soon.

**On finding a new home, and balancing in-person and digital experiences:** I believe a building helps set an identity and is a place where people can come and convene. Things like digital storytelling [and apps] are part of the toolbox that bring stories and experiences to life for visitors and the public. That's an important piece as we move forward.

We're looking at the type of space we need, but also looking at how we create long-term sustainability. We will be making announcements hopefully by April to give the community more information about [our space acquisition].

**On the museum's reputation:** The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center had done several programs with the Levine going back to 2009, 2010. We did an exhibition called "Without Sanctuary," which featured lynching photographs in America. Some of our development team hosted events here at the Levine talking about the Freedom Center and the work of the Levine.

The Levine is one of those museums people [in my field] were watching going back. The Levine was one of those first institutions that really started to push the envelope about diving into subjects of other museums just were not touching at that point.

**How Covid impacted the thinking around museums, including the Levine:** Pre-Covid, there were conversations about the future of museums across the United States. Then Covid hit, which changed the cultural dynamic across the board. The Levine was on the forefront of thinking about technology, how to use it and what that meant for them as an organization. Accessibility is a true piece in this.

They were also looking at the aging of the building (on 7th St.) and what that meant. That was something that the board started to look and ask questions about. How do we make sure the sustainability of the organization is at the forefront of the work? How do we find a space as we move forward that's going to be able to grow and build with the organization and the community? How do we connect more people to the story? How do we create more educational opportunities for people that can't visit the museum?

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## **You Ask, We Answer: CLT is one of the few big airports without Clear for security screening. Why not, and is it coming?**

OK, mystery lovers, it's time for another round of "You Ask, We Answer," The Ledger's occasional feature that takes your questions and gets to the bottom of hot bulldozer action and construction plans around town. Let's unearth some answers!

Today's question comes to us from Ledger reader **Bill**, who writes:

Can you all investigate whether CLT will be including Clear (private priority security screening) when the refurbished terminal opens? This would be a huge enhancement to minimize security lines (which have become ridiculous lately) and is available at all major airports and many minor ones in the U.S. at this point. Even Raleigh has it. Virtually everywhere I travel it is available, except my home (CLT) airport!

With all the upgrades in the new terminal and new security approaches, I've heard nothing about Clear being available.