

Great Lakes Aquarium Frequently Asked Questions

Lake Superior Center was established as an educational non-profit in 1989. This non-profit continues to operate as Great Lakes Aquarium (GLA). The facility on the Duluth waterfront opened in 2000. The core mission of the Lake Superior Center dba Great Lakes Aquarium is to “inspire stewardship, understanding and exploration of the Great Lakes and their interconnection with global ecosystems”. All activities and revenue support that mission.

Annual attendance: 125,000+ people

Annual budget: \$1.75 million

Staff: 22 full time; 5 part time

What does GLA do? The Aquarium is a mission driven organization that features animals and habitats found within the Great Lakes Basin. The Aquarium also houses animals from other global ecosystems such as the Amazon River. A changeable exhibit space is designed to interpret marine (saltwater) animals and habitat and currently features “Masters of Disguise”.

GLA provides on-site and outreach educational programming to learners of all ages. Classes and formal programming are provided to more than 10,000 pre-K-12 grade students each year.

Who owns GLA? The City of Duluth does not own Great Lakes Aquarium. The Lake Superior Center Authority, a five member state agency, holds title to the Great Lakes Aquarium building and land on behalf of the State of Minnesota. The non-profit, Great Lakes Aquarium, manages the building and provides educational programming under an agreement with the Authority.

Who runs GLA? Great Lakes Aquarium is managed, like other non-profits, by an Executive Director and Board of Directors. The City of Duluth, in accordance with early bond agreements, is represented on the Aquarium board by several non-voting members including two city councilors and a representative of the Mayor’s office. The Great Lakes Aquarium Board of Directors contracted with Ripley’s Entertainment to manage the organization from 2003-2007. There are no plans for the organization to be managed by any other entity in the future.

Why does Great Lakes Aquarium have salt water animals? The Aquarium recognizes that animals and ecosystems of the world are connected. The Great Lakes are part of a watershed that links fresh and salt water habitats. Freshwater systems, in particular the Great Lakes are unique and valuable. They remain the primary focus of the facility and programming.

Didn't the Aquarium close? In 2002, after early financial struggles, Mayor Doty closed the Aquarium using privileges associated with bond agreements. The Aquarium re-opened one week later with weekend hours only. In May 2003 the organization returned to regular operating hours under Ripley's Entertainment's management.

Where does GLA get its funding? Funding comes from gate receipts, program fees, membership sales, donations, grants, retail and parking revenue and operational support from the City of Duluth tourism tax. The tourism tax is generated by tourists during their visit to Duluth and distributed to local attractions and organizations that support tourism in the community. The appropriation of this money is approved by the Mayor's office and City Council on an annual basis. The Aquarium's operational support produces a 5:1 return on investment each year on income earned from the private sector.

Does the Aquarium give anything back to the community? GLA supports the work of schools, youth organizations and social services to provide enriching experiences for community members of all ages. Each year hundreds of people attend GLA free of charge thanks to passes donated to school silent auctions, charity events and state legacy funds. In addition, GLA staff hand out free tickets to community members on Thanksgiving Day.

What does the future hold? Great Lakes Aquarium partners with and supports organizations and agencies throughout the region. A leader in freshwater education and animal care, Great Lakes Aquarium will continue to thrive for many years to come. Even in these times of economic upheaval, GLA has maintained and increased its attendance and program participation. It remains the most visited paid attraction in the area.