



# TENNESSEE AQUARIUM

**President and CEO** | *Position Prospectus*

*Fall/Winter 2024/2025*

*Chattanooga, TN*

# About the Tennessee Aquarium

## **The Tennessee Aquarium, a non-profit organization located**

on the banks of the Tennessee River in Downtown Chattanooga, is renowned for its dedication to freshwater conservation, education, economic impact, and community engagement.

Since its opening in 1992 when it was dubbed “a cathedral to conservation,” the Aquarium has been a catalyst for the city’s “Renaissance on the River.” No single project has played a more significant role in revitalizing the downtown area and creating a welcoming and inviting atmosphere for residents, as well as the more than 28 million guests worldwide who have visited the Aquarium. Dozens of cities from across the country have sent delegations to Chattanooga to study this model of reinvigorating a city’s central core with the hope of replicating this success.

Guests travel from “the mountains to the sea” within the Aquarium’s two buildings, River Journey and Ocean Journey. Freshwater habitats within River Journey introduce guests to an Appalachian Cove Forest where feisty North American river otters romp within a living forest under the Aquarium’s glass peaks. This walk in the woods helps set the stage for an exploration of how our most important natural resource – fresh water – connects all life as it flows from the Great Smoky Mountains to the Gulf of Mexico. Along the way, visitors encounter colorful native southeastern freshwater fishes, American alligators patrolling a delta swamp, unusual species from rivers around the world, and an entire gallery dedicated to efforts to save turtles from extinction.



Next door in Ocean Journey, guests are introduced to marine and island habitats that celebrate the diversity of life beyond the biological hotspot of the Southeast. Lemurs, butterflies, penguins, and flashlight fish stand out among a richly diverse group of saltwater species like jellies, octopus, sharks, rays, and one very large green sea turtle.

The Tennessee Aquarium IMAX 3D Theater, located across the street from the Aquarium, first opened in 1996. The cinematic experience is unparalleled in our region with its six-story screen, IMAX with Laser projection system, and 12-channel sound system. New seats and a new concessions experience have been added in the past year to ensure the theater provides the best possible guest experience. In addition to its educational mission of showing environmental documentaries that complement the Aquarium experience, the theater has been programming Hollywood blockbusters like *Dune* and *Oppenheimer* drawing additional guests from throughout the region.

In 2023, the Aquarium's senior leadership team and board of trustees began devoting resources to a long-term visioning process that focused on building towards a future of continued success. With the help of consultants, surveys, and feasibility work, employees and external stakeholders have participated in dreaming big and sharing thoughts on how the bridge to the future might be built over the coming decades. Bold ideas and key insights have been revealed through this visioning process, which is ongoing, and this will help lay the groundwork for the Aquarium to move forward with confidence. The next President and CEO will have the opportunity to shape and solidify these ideas and insights by helping to develop and execute a new strategic plan. Chattanoogaans have always embraced the Tennessee Aquarium as "Our Aquarium." They have witnessed its regional impact over more than three decades. We believe they are now primed and ready to help us ensure the Aquarium, and Chattanooga, remain a premiere destination for the next 30 years.

## Accolades:

- The Tennessee Aquarium has been continuously accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums for more than 25 years, earning praise for "the commitment to helping species that we don't see or think about on a daily basis," especially freshwater indicator species.
- The Tennessee Aquarium is the number one attraction for hospitality in the U.S. (out of 224-visitor serving organizations) according to the annual Awareness, Attitudes, and Usage study by IMPACTS Experience. (2022 & 2023)
- The Tennessee Aquarium was ranked number one in the Newsweek Reader's Choice poll. (2024)
- The Tennessee Aquarium was ranked number three in the USA Today/10 Best Reader's Choice poll. (2024)
- The Tennessee Aquarium earned the TripAdvisor Traveler's Choice Award again in 2024.

# About the Opportunity

The opportunity to lead the Tennessee Aquarium as its next President & CEO is truly unique, offering an unmatched blend of conservation leadership, community engagement, and institutional growth. The Aquarium, known for its exceptional contributions to freshwater biodiversity, is not only a cornerstone of Chattanooga's cultural identity but also an institution with a broad, impactful mission. The Tennessee Aquarium holds a special place in both the community and the greater world of conservation, offering the next CEO the opportunity to come into an internationally-recognized and admired institution and envision an even greater future.

This role is more than just leading an aquarium; it's about stewarding a beloved institution that has played a pivotal role in the revitalization of Chattanooga since it opened in 1992. Stronger and more vibrant than ever, the Aquarium's celebrated status and preeminent location offers the incoming CEO the ability to significantly help to shape the future of the riverfront, the city, and beyond. The impact of this role extends far beyond the Aquarium's walls, influencing economic development, tourism, and the city's identity. As described by a local leader, the Aquarium is the anchor of the community, making it both a local landmark and a national treasure.





## About the Opportunity, cont.

The Tennessee Aquarium's exceptional reputation is reinforced by its strong financial foundation and dedicated staff, and the deep affection it commands from the community. Stakeholders emphasize the Aquarium's AAA financial standing and its status as one of Chattanooga's most respected institutions, with a mission that connects science, nature, and people. This reputation extends nationally and internationally; the Aquarium enjoys broad support not only from Chattanooga residents and businesses, but also its committed board of directors, donors, visitors from near and far, and also the international conservation and zoo/aquarium communities. This has created an incredibly stable platform from which to continue the institutional commitment to innovation and excellence and to making science accessible to all, providing meaningful educational opportunities and connecting people with the wonders of aquatic biodiversity in ways that inspire curiosity and learning. Through its exhibits and programs, the Aquarium serves as a internationally-recognized gateway to understanding freshwater ecosystems, fostering a deeper appreciation for science and conservation.

Leading the Tennessee Aquarium offers the unique opportunity to work in a setting that merges professional opportunities and challenges with personal fulfillment. This is an opportunity to lead an organization that is deeply intertwined with the city's identity, one that continues to evolve and expand its influence on both a national and international scale. For a leader passionate about conservation, education, science, and community impact, this is the chance of a lifetime.

# Position Summary

**The President and CEO is the most senior level position at the Tennessee Aquarium and reports directly to the Board of Trustees. The President and CEO oversees all functions of the Aquarium and has a seven-person senior management team. The President and CEO also leads the commitment to a culture of diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion throughout the organization and within the community.**

The President and CEO is responsible for leading a fiscally sound and well-balanced overall operation. This includes the Tennessee Aquarium, the Tennessee Aquarium IMAX 3D Theater, the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute, and all assets of the private, nonprofit organization.



The President and CEO also leads the strategic vision and growth of the organization, guiding the planning and implementation of fundraising practices to generate ongoing support, steer future expansion projects, and continually grow the base of donors and supporters.

As the organization's public face, the President and CEO integrates the strategic direction from the Board into the Aquarium's day-to-day operational plans and serves as the interface between the internal and external stakeholders and the local community.

The President and CEO communicates the organization's purpose, vision, mission, core values, strategic plan, and overall community impact to inspire everyone within the organization to meet or exceed all of its objectives while generating broad community support for our mission.

# Essential Duties & Responsibilities

## Mission Advancement

- The President and CEO will engage with and provide thought leadership to local government officials and partners like River City Company, Chattanooga Tourism Company, the Chattanooga Design Studio, Hunter Museum of American Art, Creative Discovery Museum and the Downtown Chattanooga Alliance to promote and advocate for the Aquarium's interests and strategic plans as the city grows.
- Serve as the highest-ranking spokesperson for the organization and be ultimately responsible for the organization's reputation and relationships with internal and external stakeholders, including staff, volunteers, board members, community partners, funders, local government, and the media.
- Provide a positive and resilient leadership style to the senior management team, staff, and volunteers.
- Develop the organization's strategic plan, including mission, vision, core values, goals, and objectives, with the board of trustees, the senior management team, and the director of inclusion, equity, and diversity.
- Ensure an elevated level of program quality, including regular tracking, evaluation, and reporting on measures of success.
- Serve as an education and conservation champion who is committed to using the Aquarium's platform and community trust to advocate for all aspects of protecting water and wildlife.
- Remain current on trends and issues in the zoo and aquarium profession to provide leadership that ensures the Tennessee Aquarium retains its accreditation with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and remains at the forefront of animal wellbeing, conservation, education, and sustainability.
- Demonstrate decision-making supporting appropriate cultural sensitivity, dedication, compassion, and authenticity.
- Provide opportunities for professional development to grow and retain staff expertise while increasing the organization's reputation for leadership.

## Financial Sustainability

- Set vision and goals to effectively coordinate development and fundraising efforts with the Aquarium's development team.
- Demonstrate a record of success and proficiency at fundraising and cultivating donors in both one-on-one and group settings.
- Raise funds to support organizational operations from a variety of sources, including government grants, foundations, corporate, and individual donors.
- Demonstrate the ability to engage with various individuals, including high-wealth donors, legislators, and civic and community leaders.
- Oversee all budgets, compensation surveys, and fiscal management of the organization while ensuring compliance with all financial policies and providing regular reporting to the Board of Trustees on the organization's financial status and approval.
- Maintain knowledge of land and facilities management, including preventative/predictive maintenance and provisions for adequate funding to support, maintain, advance, and enhance the on-site and off-site campus locations.
- Develop a long-range financial plan and strategic plan.

## Governance

- Assemble a diverse and inclusive Board of Trustees that is highly engaged and willing to leverage and secure financial resources to ensure the organization's future success.
- Cultivate a strong, transparent working relationship with the Board of Trustees and provide accurate, complete, and timely information on the organization's programs, services, and finances.
- Inform and advise the Board regarding current trends, challenges, and opportunities critical to the organization's mission and operations.
- Present appropriate verbal and written communication and presentation skills, with a record of being socially aware and astute while remaining apolitical.
- Seek opportunities to serve on local and statewide boards and represent the Aquarium at national conferences and meetings while networking to advance the Aquarium's mission.
- Collaborate with all professional colleagues to facilitate growth in attendance, membership, funding, and development opportunities.
- Introduce the Aquarium to new, diverse audiences and professional associations.



## Operations

- Implement the necessary financial, human resources, and other management and administrative policies and procedures for the organization and bring relevant policies to the Board of Trustees for review and approval. Ensure regular salary and benefits surveys are completed and adequate adjustments are made to maintain a high-performing staff at a competitive level.
- Consistently provide the highest standards of animal wellbeing.
- Establish "guest satisfaction" as a high priority in all business areas.
- Oversee the creation of contingency plans and emergency/crisis plans.
- Prioritize the legal and ethical integrity of the organization and monitor its compliance with all applicable laws and regulations.





# Knowledge, Skills, & Abilities Required

- Knowledge and experience managing senior-level staff and operational teams.
- Excellent verbal/written communication skills as well as presentation skills.
- Knowledge of or active engagement with a positive presence in social media.
- A solid professional reputation, record of integrity, sound judgment, and respect for established ethical standards.
- Social dynamism and confidence in large groups, with an ability to multitask, provide strong attention to detail, and meet deadlines.
- Vision and creativity to motivate staff and influence community leaders; to engage and foster relationships with the community, public and private agencies, and the Tennessee Aquarium Board of Trustees.
- Ability to successfully handle conflict and make tough decisions when necessary.
- A natural ability to act as a catalyst and inspire action in others.



# Education & Experience Required

- A bachelor's degree is required, and an advanced degree is preferred.
- Seven or more years of experience in a senior leadership position is required.
- Seven or more years of experience in fundraising, fiscal management, budgeting, and financial forecasting is required.
- Experience and strong skills in leadership, management, and supervision in a for-profit or nonprofit organization.
- An energetic leadership style with a passion for animals and their welfare.
- Excellent verbal/written communication reflecting diplomacy and discretion.
- Experience and comfort working with media in person, in front of a recording device, or in print.
- Proven crisis management experience with a strong safety background.
- Strong skills in MS Office and other computer systems.





## Diversity Statement

The southeastern United States is an underwater rainforest with an incredible number of aquatic species. This rich diversity is part of our natural heritage, a gift to be discovered, appreciated and protected. Similarly, the diversity of human experience in our region is part of our cultural heritage, a gift to be celebrated, respected, and shared. Whether a natural ecosystem or a human community, diversity creates strength and resilience. For these reasons, we are committed to increasing the diversity of those we work with, including our staff, board, volunteers, members, visitors, partners, and supporters. Together, we will connect people with nature and empower them to make informed decisions about water and wildlife.

# Tennessee Aquarium Board of Trustees - 2024

**Valoria Armstrong, Board Chair**  
**Chief Global Inclusion and  
Diversity Officer, Unum**

**Scott Pierce, Vice Chair / Chair Elect**  
**Executive VP & COO, BlueCross  
BlueShield of TN**

**Dr. Catherine Colby, Secretary**  
**Community Development  
Consultant – Latin America and  
the Caribbean**

**Patrick Stowe, Treasurer**  
**Managing Director,**  
Pointer Management  
Company

**Cameron Doody**  
**Co-Founder and General Partner,**  
Brickyard

**Wade Hinton, Esq.**  
**CEO & Founder, Hinton &  
Company**

**Candy C. Johnson, MPA**  
**President & CEO, Urban League of  
Chattanooga**

**Daphne Kirksey**  
**External & Government Affairs  
Manager, Tennessee American Water**

**Harrison Lewis**  
**Senior Accountant, Ernst  
& Young**

**Stacy Lightfoot**  
**Vice Chancellor for Access and  
Engagement, The Division of Access  
and Engagement, University of  
Tennessee at Chattanooga**

**Matt M. Rasmussen**  
**Senior VP, Nuclear Engineering &  
Operations Support, TVA**

**Shalin Tejani**  
**President & Owner, Ribbons and  
Bows Oh My!**



# Directly Reporting to the President & CEO

## **Thom Benson**

V.P., Chief Communications  
and Marketing Officer

## **Thom Demas**

V.P., Chief Husbandry and  
Exhibits Officer

## **Michael Floyd**

V.P., Chief Guest  
Experience Officer

## **Anna L. George, Ph.D.**

V.P., Chief Conservation and  
Education Officer

## **Melanie King**

V.P., Chief Development  
Officer

## **Mara-Lynne Payne**

Director of Inclusion,  
Equity and Diversity

## **Julie Piper**

V.P., Chief Human  
Resources Officer

## **Gordon Stalans**

V.P., COO,  
CFO, CIO

## **Michelle Thompson**

Executive Assistant and  
Board Liaison

# Moving to Chattanooga, TN

## **Chattanooga is a growing destination.**

In April 2024, moveBuddha.com ranked Chattanooga among the top destinations for movers. Tennessee itself ranks 6th in the nation for net migration.

## **Breathtaking Outdoors & Adventure**

Nestled between the stunning mountains of Southeast Tennessee and the Tennessee River, Chattanooga offers unparalleled access to outdoor recreation. In just minutes, residents can enjoy hiking, cycling, rafting, kayaking, and mountain climbing. The city is an outdoor lover's paradise, with its natural beauty right in its backyard.

## **Vibrant Downtown & Culture**

The revitalized downtown offers a wealth of dining, shopping, and cultural experiences. From world-class restaurants to boutique shops, start-ups, and renowned institutions like the Tennessee Aquarium, there's always something happening. Visitors and locals alike are drawn to its unique charm and cultural offerings.

## **Affordable Living**

Chattanooga is affordable, with a cost of living 10% lower than the national average, making it an attractive option for families, young professionals, and retirees alike.

## **Innovation Hub: The "Gig City"**

Chattanooga was the first city in the U.S. to roll out a citywide gigabit network, earning it the nickname "Gig City." This innovation provides free high-speed internet for residents, making it especially attractive for remote workers, tech companies, and students. It continues to position Chattanooga as a growing tech hub.





## Top Rankings & Recognition

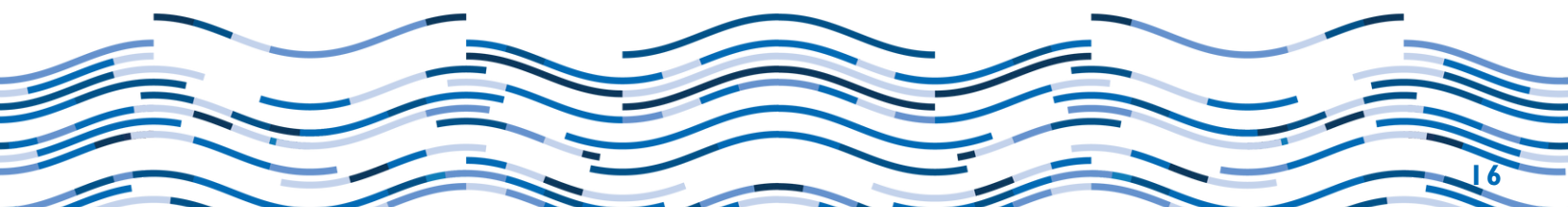
- In 2024, U.S. News & World Report named Chattanooga one of the “Top 25 Best Places to Live in the South” and ranked it in the Top 30 places to live in the overall country. This is based on four factors: quality of life, value, desirability and job market.
- Money Magazine listed it among the “Top 50 Places to Live in the U.S.”
- In a February 2023 article, Forbes ranked Chattanooga as one of the “Best Places to Travel in 2023” globally, putting it in the same league as destinations like Botswana and the Canary Islands.
- Outdoor Magazine ranked Chattanooga #2 in “The Best Mountain Towns in the Southeastern US” in August 2024.

## Youthful Energy, yet Great for Retirees

With 60% of its population under the age of 44, Chattanooga is a youthful, vibrant city. However, it’s also recognized as an excellent retirement destination, offering the best of both worlds.

## A City Committed to Collaboration, Sustainability & Innovation

A spirit of collaboration, sustainability, and forward-thinking defines Chattanooga’s ethos, rooted in a welcoming spirit and a dedication to innovation. It’s a place where community thrives, and new ideas are embraced.





## Desired Start Date

January / February 2025

## Compensation

The Tennessee Aquarium offers an annual salary ranging from \$250,000 to \$350,000. The salary offer will depend on several factors, including educational qualifications, training, years of experience, and performance in previous roles.

## Benefits

The Tennessee Aquarium will offer the new President & CEO performance-based bonuses, relocation assistance, and a highly competitive and comprehensive benefits package.

## Location

Chattanooga, TN (relocation assistance provided)

## To Apply

The Tennessee Aquarium has retained Kay Linder, Partner within ThinkingAhead Executive Search's Nonprofit Division to serve as our recruitment partner. If you are interested and qualified, please [apply here](#).

Kay Linder  
Partner, Nonprofit Division  
ThinkingAhead Executive Search  
[klinder@thinkingahead.com](mailto:klinder@thinkingahead.com)

