

## **Bright Ideas Are Rolling On The River; Ambitious Drive For Center Starts**

by Elizabeth Mullener Staff writer

**May 23, 1999**

It might be a museum. It might be a scientific research center. It might be a think tank or a laboratory or a conference center. Or it might be all of them.

It could be a single building. It could be a campus. Or it could be a mix of buildings, old and new, scattered across town.

Some people believe there's a 5 percent chance it will happen. Others think there's a 100 percent chance. Many believe it's 50/50. But one thing is for sure: The plan to create a center in New Orleans dedicated to the Mississippi River, a celebration and investigation of its past and future, its culture and science, the art it has inspired and the industry it has spawned, is an ambitious one. "We want people involved in this place, whether a visitor or a scientist, to have a sense of awe at the power of the Mississippi River," said John Barry, author of the hit book "Rising Tide" and godfather of the notion. "This is not a museum of the quaint; this is not some pretty steamboat. We want a visitor to come away with an understanding of what the Mississippi is, which is one of the most powerful forces on the planet, both in terms of its physical force and in terms of its impact on history. And researchers will go deep into every aspect of the river, from geology to engineering, from molecular biology to history and music." Like many ideas whose strength derives from their simplicity, it seems obvious in hindsight.

### **Keeping eye on vision**

The project is in its infancy, but for about seven months a group of high-powered thinkers in New Orleans has been gathering to toss the idea around. The major players include Scott Cowen, president of Tulane University, who is chairman of the group; John Pecoul, a vice president at Xavier University; urban planner Robert Tannen; Tulane scientist John McLachlan; airport consultant Anthony Mumphy; Ron Forman, chief executive of the Audubon Institute; Joseph Cocchiara from the Port of New Orleans; Gene D'Amour, a Tulane vice president, and Barry. With a collection of strong personalities and strapping egos, the brainstorm sessions, by all accounts, have been creative, focused, dynamic and popping with intellectual energy. "All of these people are accomplished in their own right," McLachlan said. "And yet they all keep their eye on the vision. It's amazing how cooperative it's been, how quickly we get to the point. It's been a powerful experience." What has emerged so far is that the project likely will cost more than \$100 million and could attract 1 million to 2 million visitors a year, some of them drawn to town solely by the center. It could have several stakeholders, including Tulane and Xavier Universities, the Port of New Orleans, the Audubon Institute, the City of New Orleans and the State of Louisiana. And it could be operated by a consortium of institutions. One possible scenario, Barry

said, is that the museum component would be run by the Audubon Institute and the research component would be run by the two universities. At least a portion of the center will be on the river. Ron Brinson, president of the port, has offered the group several possibilities somewhere between the Industrial Canal and the St. Thomas public housing complex. Likely spots in that corridor include the site of the defunct River City casino, a site on the river side of the Convention Center, a site near the Louisa Street wharf and the new New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, a site in Algiers Point and another at the Gov. Nicholls Street wharf. The latter is liable to be controversial because it impinges on the French Quarter and could rile preservationists. Tannen said the project would be completed within five years. Committee members are hoping it will open in 2003, which is the 200th anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase, when the United States gained much of the territory through which the Mississippi runs.

### **Eager to work**

Because the nature of the undertaking has not been determined, it has not been given a name. But working titles include Riverium (or Rivereum), Museum of the Mississippi and the Mississippi River Experience. The group is seeking \$150,000 in seed money. It has \$50,000 in hand, collected from Tulane, Xavier, the Audubon Institute, the port and the Downtown Development District. With the governor behind the project, the State is likely to come up with another \$50,000 and the rest is being sought from local foundations and business groups.

The hallmark building of the center will be a significant one, possibly about the size of the land-based casino and possibly designed by world-renowned architect Frank Gehry, who attended the last meeting and says he would gladly take the job. "Oh, by God, yes," he said. "That would be nice." From the beginning, Cowen said, he has issued only one directive: that the project be a bold one.

"I don't know how many times I've said this: If we're going to do something, let it be breathtaking," he said. "Let it be so visionary and inspirational that people will want to be a part of it."

Bruce Mau, a celebrated designer who works out of Toronto, wants to be part of it. Recently brought on board, he is charged with the onerous task of bringing some shape to the exhilarating but unformed notions the group has put out. He is scheduled to make a presentation in early June. "Once I began to understand what their vision and ambitions were, I was astounded by what they wanted to achieve," he said. "They are setting their sights as high as can be. They're wildly ambitious, but in a totally enlightened way. "There's a potential to make something here that people from all over the world will need to come to if they're interested in rivers -- in turbulence or the business and economy of rivers or the culture of rivers, or the culture of this river. If you can make a place that is really focused and specialized, it becomes a destination for anyone interested in those fields. That's the potential of this project."

## **Impact to New Orleans**

With their imaginations given free rein, participants in the conceptualization of the project have come up with a variety of possible features for it. The museum might, for instance, have a glass wall from the surface of the river to its bottom, with an elevator shaft running the whole distance. "That means you could be looking at as much as 200 feet of water," Barry said. "It would be a gripping, compelling experience."

It might have an exhibit where viewers could experience the force of water as it goes over a dam, where the velocity of the flow could be measured and a viewer could calculate the impact on a boat or a person. Or, it might have a simulator like those used to train river pilots that creates a virtual-reality experience of the Mississippi: a helicopter ride to an offshore drilling rig, a plane flying up and down the course of the river or a trip in a paddle wheeler or even a canoe. In fact, contact already has been made by an organization thinking of donating a new, up-to-the-minute simulator valued at \$6 million.

In the educational arena, the center might offer two-day courses open to the public on a particular aspect of the river, D'Amour said, on the development of jazz and how it spread up and down the Mississippi, on how the river influenced the location and growth of major cities along its banks, on the shipping industry and how it has changed the course of the river and its economics, on the toxic pollutants in the river, where they have come from and how they have influenced water life forms.

Students from the sixth grade up could take courses, participate in research, go out with a scientist to collect data or visit a river research station. The impact on the economic development of metro area, planners envision, could be substantial.

"It's more than tourism, it's more than a museum," Mumphrey said. "It could impact our educational institutions in terms of what we deliver to students from elementary through graduate schools. It could create good, clean, high-paying jobs.

"And it could enhance the stature of New Orleans among the cities of the world. It would add another dimension, the dimension of high technology and research. New Orleans could be the world center for river research and education. "Since World War II, there have been a number of events in this city that have kept it going in terms of economic development. One has been Michoud and the space program. Two is tourism and the Superdome. Three is the Convention Center. And this could be the fourth leap forward."