

"Big Muddy museum sought"

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Two years ago, it was just a gleam in the eyes of a small group of men - an homage to the science and culture of the Mississippi River that would be part museum, part research laboratory, part school, part think tank, part conference center. Today, it's still just a gleam in their eyes. But it's a bigger gleam and it's more refined, better thought out and closer to possible fruition. It has a name now: the National Center for the Mississippi River.

It has at least a target location: a site that would combine the shuttered Entergy power plant on Tchoupitoulas Street and the former River City Casino property. It has a leader, John McLachlan, an internationally renowned biologist and director of Tulane University's Center for Bioenvironmental Research. It has a graphic designer, Bruce Mau, widely regarded as one of the world's greatest. And it has an architect, Frank Gehry, currently the toast of the architectural world for his brash postmodernist Guggenheim Museum in the Spanish city of Bilbao. "This is one of those projects I like, just one of those elegant, beautiful projects for a city," said Scott Cowen, president of Tulane University and the group's guiding spirit. "If it doesn't happen, it's not like the city won't survive. But if it does, it would be wonderful."

It is a wildly ambitious undertaking, devised by a group remarkable for its creative energy, including Cowen, McLachlan, Xavier University President Norman Francis, urban planner Robert Tannen, Tulane Vice President Gene D'Amour, port President Ron Brinson, airport consultant Anthony Mumphrey and John Barry, whose best-selling book about the devastating 1927 Mississippi River flood, "Rising Tide," sparked the notion for the museum in the first place. Conceived as both a major tourist attraction and a research center with implications for New Orleans' future in the tech-driven "new economy," the center would deal with subjects as diverse as the river's music, its food, its history, its literature, the industry it has spawned, the technology it has inspired and the politics surrounding it, as well as its ecology and science.

And it would touch on them in daring and imaginative ways. Under the center's auspices, scholars might work on mapping the river's floor with sonar, determining the consequence of sediment buildup, predicting floods or studying the river's carbon cycle. And then too, the center might commission a dance work based on the Mississippi or schedule concerts of jazz, blues or the other musical idioms that have traveled the river over generations. Museum exhibits could include a cybernetic journey to the river's depths, where visitors would look up at a 12-story wall of water, or a computer-generated model of the river's course from start to finish.

A student might spend a weekend helping scientists harvest data on a research vessel. An Internet site called the RiverWeb would be a worldwide communications hub for research. Visitors might take a guided river walk or simulate an underwater experience in a 200-seat IMAX theater. The site of all this activity is envisioned as a campus of several buildings. One would include the museum and the theater, with a dramatic atrium overlooking the river. A second building would be a teaching facility; a third would be the research center. And finally, the conference center would include meeting spaces, both small and large, as well as a hotel, restaurants and a gift shop. "I have a strong sense that we should build the most environmentally sensitive building in the world," McLachlan said. "I want people to come see it not just because it's a Frank Gehry building but because it's environmentally smart."

Flood of cash needed

Now all the project needs is money. "We've got squat," Cowen said. It didn't matter until recently. "We've got a lot of smart people, we have ambition, desire, perseverance, energy," Cowen said. "We have a can-do attitude. So who needed money?" The center's organizers figure they need \$65 million, to be exact. That's just for phase one. Another \$65 million would get the whole project up and running. They calculate the museum will cost about \$55 million, the research facility \$20 million, the conference center \$17.3 million, the retail space \$3.6 million and the hotel \$33 million. It is not surprising that the center's first - and only - staff member is a fundraiser. In round numbers, they are looking for \$10 million to \$15 million from federal agencies, including the Army Corps of Engineers and the departments of Interior, Commerce and Transportation. Another \$10 million to \$15 million, they hope, would come from the state. And the rest would come from private donors and foundations. "This is a major civic undertaking," D'Amour said. "Like the aquarium or the zoo. It would be a major tourist destination."

The group is eyeing the Entergy/River City buildings, not far from the museum district that is developing around Lee Circle. The two are about 150 yards apart, but a linear park along the river, proposed recently by the Trust for Public Land, would connect the two. The River City building is owned by the Port of New Orleans, whose president, Brinson, has been involved with the project since its inception. "The future of the building would have to be decided by the members of the Dock Board," said Brinson, who steps down next year. "But I would recommend the board look with favor on such a concept. Riverfront redevelopment has been pretty darn important in this city in the last 20 years. We need to keep that redevelopment going. And this kind of project really works for that," Brinson said. The Entergy property is a little iffier. First, several other groups around town would like to get their hands on it, and there might be some environmental cleanup to do. The electrical substation next door would have to be relocated. The decision, said Horace Webb, Entergy's senior vice president, might not be final for another year and a half.

Project hits cresting stage

Over the course of its two-year gestation period, the project has undergone a series of developmental stages. The first year was marked by a burst of creative invention as the core group considered a variety of possibilities. First it decided what it didn't want. "When you think of a museum, you think of a place that's static, archival, that you go in and look at," McLachlan said. Participants didn't want that. They wanted something synergistic. "What we need is a place where art and science and technology and humanities can come together and have that truly exciting interface where major creation occurs," McLachlan said. At this stage, with ideas crackling at every meeting, they called in Gehry and Mau, both of whom were enchanted with the group's vision. "Bruce Mau is one of the leading designers in the world, and he thinks this is the greatest thing since sliced bread," Cowen said of the man who would create the museum's exhibits and interior environments. "And Frank Gehry thinks it's an architect's dream. When you have people of that caliber saying things like that, you want to try to make it happen."

Things had never looked more promising than last fall, when the core group was called to the White House to make a presentation before representatives of a variety of agencies. The Clinton administration had a program called American Heritage Rivers, and the New Orleans project sounded like a perfect fit. "They showed a great deal of interest," Cowen said. "They thought it was ambitious and visionary. But nobody at that meeting was opening their checkbooks." In fact, the American Heritage Rivers program, which had never been popular with the Republicans, looked to be pretty much dead in the water after the November election finally was resolved in favor of President Bush. The museum's creators dropped back to take a longer view. "Somebody has got to make this a priority for the next five years," Cowen said. "I can't do that. It's important to me. I'd like to see it happen. I think it would be good for Tulane. But it's not my highest priority. "That's where McLachlan came in. At a meeting in late February, he was selected to carry the banner for the 30-member board. "I'm thrilled about this idea," he said. "I have a passion for it."

Swimming with the big fish

If the group manages to pull off its plan, the National Center for the Mississippi River would put New Orleans on the map as the world focus for river research. It would create a significant number of high-paying, high-tech jobs. It would enhance New Orleans' prospects to become a player in the new economy. And it would provide a magnet for tourists outside the fragile French Quarter, which is already strained to the max. "You have the chance for New Orleans to be a destination for people who want to learn things in the most novel ways," McLachlan said, "rather than a place people come just to drink a beer." Mumphrey echoes the sentiment. "This is a terrific project," he said. "It's almost impossible to separate New Orleans and the Mississippi River. We do it all here – the engineering, the environmental, the commerce, the culture. We do it all, but we've never exploited what we've done. And we should."