

Museum to explore expansion possibilities

By Scott Waltman
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Charged with caring for Brown County's past, the Dacotah Prairie Museum is thinking about its own future.

Space is tight at the museum, and it's time to make a decision, said Director Sue Gates. Either the museum needs to plan to expand, or it has to accept that it will be able to capture only a portion of the region's history - through 1930 or so.

"That should never happen. We are a teacher's best tool for history," Gates said.

Obviously, she would prefer an expansion. But, she said, input from the public will be the primary factor in making a decision.

The museum has just finished a series of meetings to garner input about a possible expansion. Gates said those who attended were able to give suggestions about how existing space at the 28,000-square foot museum should be used as well as a possible expansion. Feedback about adding on has been encouraging, she said. But if that changes or a feasibility study reveals big problems, the museum will probably stay as is.

Should the museum decide to expand it would double its space by building a new 142 by 50-foot addition immediately north of the museum.

As things are, Gates said, there are times when the museum has to turn down offered artifacts. There just isn't space to house them. That's especially true for items from, say, the World War II era, a time the museum's displays don't regularly cover. Often, Gates said, the museum only gets one chance to scoop up new artifacts. If it has to turn them down, the person offering them usually finds another way to get rid of them. In a decade or so, Gates said, World War II artifacts will be tough to come by because veterans are aging. She'd like the museum to be able to store and use them.

Even so, Gates said, she's prepared to deal with a future that doesn't include expanding. If that's the case, she said, the museum's focus will simply be on prairie and pioneer history.

The possible expansion, in essence, would be a new building that would be connected to the existing museum. It would have four levels, including a basement. It would likely cost between \$4 million and \$5 million, Gates said. The money would be raised privately through a fund-raising drive and through applying for grants, she said.

Here is what tentative plans call for:

Basement: Exhibit preparation area/artifact storage

First floor: Lobby, gift shop, loading dock, Main Street entrance

Second floor: Multipurpose room, kitchen, exhibit space

Third floor: Storage, offices

The expansion would free up room about 7,100 more feet for displays, Gates said. Much of that would be in the space currently used by the museum.



A new elevator and restrooms that are compatible with the Americans With Disabilities Act would also be part of the expansion.

Now, about a third of the museum is devoted to permanent displays - animals and the prairie diorama, for example. Those cannot be changed, and it would be nice to have more space for rotating exhibits, Gates said.

She said a potential feasibility study could start in six months or so. It would help determine whether an addition is realistic.

The museum would not need to charge admission because of the addition, Gates said.

Land on which the museum would expand is owned by the county and now used as a parking lot. The commission knows about the possible plans and has verbally committed to donate the land to the museum, Gates said.

Commissioner Deb Knecht said the commission did make that decision a few years ago, but would probably have to again talk about whether to give the land to the museum. Losing the parking spaces is a bigger factor now because a jail expansion project also decreased parking in the area. The county plans to develop a new lot nearby just north of Railroad Avenue, but no plans have been set for that work. Still, Knecht said, the commission would consider giving the land to the museum. It's certainly a better option than the museum asking for \$4 million or \$5 million to cover the project, she said.

If the the feasibility study is sought and it recommends an addition and there are no problems with fund-raising or construction, the earliest work would be done on the new space is late 2010, Gates said. But that's a best-case scenario.

"It's not going to be a piece of cake," Gates said, specifically referring to the fund-raising.

While the county wouldn't be asked to pay for addition, per se, it would incur extra costs if it's built. They would range from higher utility bills to the possibility of extra staffers, Gates said.

Gates said current workers have spent a few years preparing for a possible expansion. There is a drawing of what it could look like, but there are no blueprints, she said. Building an addition would be cheaper than remodeling a nearby building and would be safer for the museum's collection, she said.

An addition would look similar to the current museum, complementing it and the historic downtown area, Gates said.

Last year, the museum finished a renovation project that included redesigning the entrance, new windows, adding outdoor canopies, increasing second floor exhibit space and creating and renovating exhibits. Planning for that undertaking started in 2001. The cost was about \$500,000. Of that, \$300,000 was raised and \$200,000 came from grants, Gates said.

With that done, the museum has arrived at a fork in the road, Gates said. She hopes it leads to a larger building with an increased capacity to share history's stories.

"We just aren't meeting the needs, I don't think, of the community as well as we could be," she said.