

LAS VEGAS ART MUSEUM A STEP CLOSER TO REALITY

Felicia Mello Thursday, September 19, 2016 (6:13 p.m.)



The empty lot at South Grand Central Parkway and West Symphony Park Avenue in Las Vegas, shown on Saturday, June 20, 2015, is one of the sites proposed for an art museum. (Jason Ogulnik/Las Vegas Review-Journal)

It's a million-dollar question that's long bedeviled Las Vegas fine art lovers: Can a city known more for spectacle than cultural substance ever have a major museum of its own?

Now a group of aficionados has come up with a million-dollar answer — or more precisely, a \$2 million one — and city government is stepping up its efforts to make the project a reality.

Representatives of the city of Las Vegas said last week the city will set aside up to 1.5 acres of city-owned land to be donated for The Art Museum at Symphony Park, fulfilling an agreement signed with

backers last year to provide a location if the group raised a million dollars. The museum's supporters surpassed that target last month, raising more than twice that amount.

"I'm so very excited about the burgeoning community support for a world-class art museum at Symphony Park," Mayor Carolyn Goodman said. "We will continue to work with the backers and leadership on this project."

It's the second time in three years that a small but dedicated band of art boosters has attempted to bring the museum to life. A 2013 effort led by Las Vegas gallery owner Brett Sperry failed to gain traction in part because of the proposed location — a wedge-shaped parcel next to Charleston Boulevard in the Arts District — and what some potential investors saw as a limited focus on contemporary art.

This time around, supporters envision a 100,000-square-foot, architecturally significant building, with a diverse collection spanning contemporary artists, old masters and beyond — a welcoming public space within walking distance of The Smith Center for the Performing Arts and Discovery Children's Museum with an outdoor sculpture garden, restaurant and other amenities.

If successful, the proposed museum would be the first of its kind in Las Vegas, where art institutions have struggled to find permanent homes and loyal followings. Existing art venues are either modest in size, tied to a larger institution — like UNLV's Marjorie Barrick Museum — or, like the Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art, emphasize prepackaged traveling shows.

But first, more money needs to be raised — about \$85 million more, board members estimate. The city has pledged to provide parking, a matching donation of \$1 million, and an additional \$1 million if the museum meets future fundraising goals. City officials will now work with the museum board to select an appropriate parcel in Symphony Park.

"An art museum in this city is going to be a tough sell. But it can be done," said Patrick Duffy, a collector who served as president of the now-closed Las Vegas Art Museum, which drew crowds to its opening parties inside the Sahara West Library building but suffered from low overall attendance and shuttered in 2009.

Involving locals in the planning process is key, said Duffy.

"You can't all of a sudden pop up and the 15 people on the board tell 2 million people what they're going to get, and then expect those 2 million to come barreling across the valley to see it," he said.

The museum team has restructured its board of directors, with Katie O'Neill — a second-generation Las Vegas who is also the great-granddaughter of casino pioneer Benny Binion — now serving as chair. A

former gallerist, O'Neill founded an arts education nonprofit in New York before returning to Las Vegas and heading up the campaign. Other board members include developers Uri Vaknin and Sam Cherry, art adviser Michele Quinn, Quentin Abramo of Facilite and the El Cortez's Alexandra Epstein Gudai.

"Katie and the people on the board represent a generation of Las Vegans that are young and excited about raising families there," said Amanda Horn, communications director for the state's only accredited art museum, the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno. "They've grown up there, they understand the dynamics and are saying we want art and culture to be part of the Las Vegas community in the long term."

They've also chosen a moment when the national visual arts spotlight is shining on Las Vegas, with Swiss sculptor Ugo Rondinone's candy-colored boulder skewers, Seven Magic Mountains, drawing celebrities like Jay Z and Beyoncé to the desert scrub alongside Interstate 15.

Tilting the Basin, a contemporary art exhibit that brings together work from northern and southern Nevada artists, is showing at the Nevada Museum of Art, and the museum is in discussions with board members of The Art Museum at Symphony Park about a possible future partnership. The two institutions will collaborate to mount a version of Tilting the Basin in Downtown Las Vegas in Spring 2017.

Also in the works: a limited-edition portfolio of prints from Las Vegas artists that will sell for \$10,000 as a fundraiser for the nascent museum.

While the new museum likely wouldn't have a permanent collection at first, it could function along the lines of a German Kunsthalle — or art hall — hosting traveling exhibits and borrowed work, supporters say.

"We want to have multiple exhibits going on simultaneously, so you could go in and see a traveling blockbuster Warhol show, a more regional viewing of Native American photography in the past 100 years, works from students in the Clark County School District and a private collection from Las Vegas that's on loan," O'Neill said.

Such an eclectic mix would inspire Las Vegas artists, elevating the scene here, said Justin Favela, the current artist-in-residence at Juhl lofts, whose large-scale installations draw on Mexican paper crafts. He said other artists he knows are cautiously optimistic.

“I think people are genuinely excited, but some are a little skeptical because we’ve kind of seen this before,” he said. “They don’t know if it’s actually going to happen.”

Public-private partnerships can help get museums off the ground in younger cities that lack established philanthropic traditions, said Michael Spring, cultural affairs director for Miami-Dade County, a metropolitan area that, like Las Vegas, depends heavily on tourism and has a relatively transient population. The county allocated \$100 million in bond funds for the Herzog and de Meuron–designed Pérez Art Museum Miami, which opened in 2013 and drew 300,000 visitors in its first year.

“The underlying accomplishment here was having our civic leadership come to this epiphany that the arts really put cities on the map as being serious places for people to live and visit and for businesses to develop,” said Spring.

In Las Vegas, some of that support has begun to line up, including from some of the city’s most influential businesses.

“More than a place that showcases art, a museum is a foundation of knowledge and inspiration that connects people to their community,” MGM Resorts chairman and CEO James Murren wrote in a July letter to Mayor Goodman. “It must be recognized that to continue our city’s growth into the 21st century, it is imperative to have a proper visual arts museum.”

Richard Worthington, president and chief operating officer of The Molasky Group of Companies, echoed the sentiment.

“This art museum is the logical progression of the revitalization of downtown,” he said. “People are hungry for this kind of cultural amenity, and not everybody wants to go through a smoke-filled, jingle-jangle casino to get to it.”