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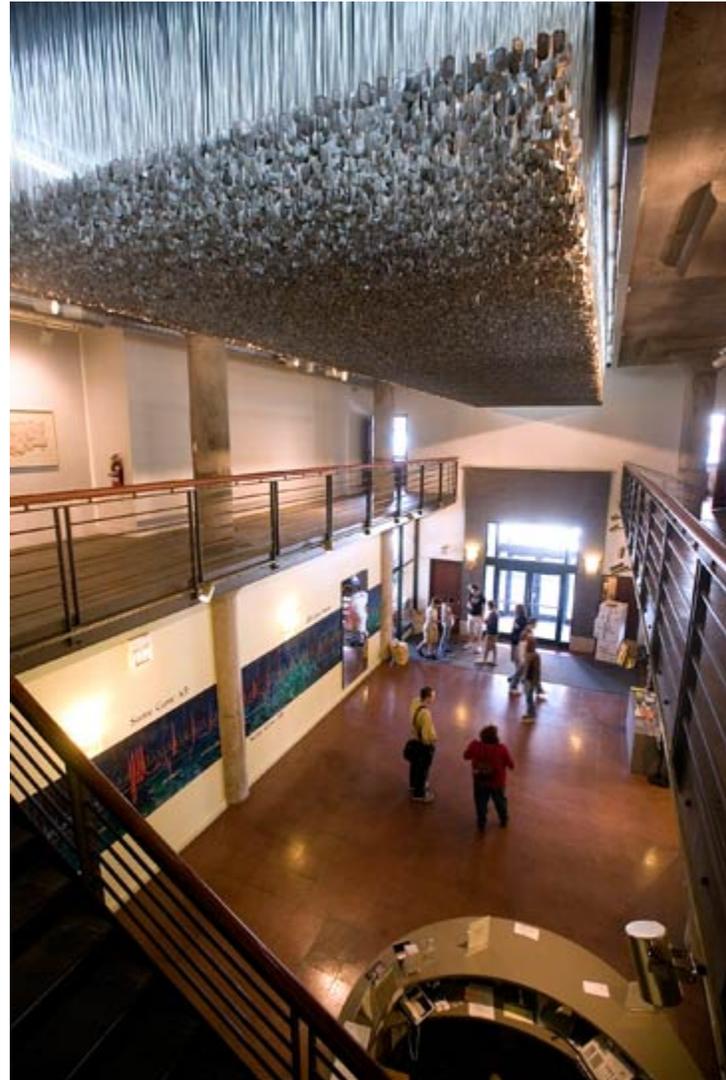
Survey suggests themes for new field house

Negotiations continue among museum stakeholders

By MICAH MAIDENBERG
Editor

Near South Side residents envision a new field house in the Prairie District as a flexible space with offerings designed to appeal to a wide range of ages and a focus on arts and educational programming.

The survey was prompted by plans to convert the National Vietnam Veteran's Art Museum, 1801 S. Indiana, into a Chicago Park District facility. The museum has title to the building. Under the acquisition deal, the park district would gain control of the three-story, 30,000-square foot structure, a plaza and Women's Park, located behind the building.



National Vietnam Veteran's Art Museum
File

In the survey, 57 percent of the 512 respondents perceived the building as focusing on arts and educational activities, with 43 percent understanding it as primarily offering athletics and exercise space. Seventy percent of the survey respondents said they reside in the 60616 area code, which includes the future field house, Prairie District and points south.

Other survey findings include a desire to keep the current plaza between Café Society and Glessner House open for café use and community events; to create partnerships with other museums and cultural facilities; and to maintain Women's Park, located behind the field house, as a passive park.

"This is a critical facility to keep people down in the South Loop, both people with families and people who want to stay long term," said Jeff Ayersman, a board member of the Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance.

The survey results are posted on the group's Web site and were shared with residents at a recent community meeting.

At the meeting, ideas for programming included adult cooking classes, an indoor playground, Wii-based exercise games and converting an abandoned freight elevator into a climbing wall.

Once the city acquires the building from the veteran's museum, they will deed it to the park district, which would re-engineer the structure-Farr Associates, an architectural firm, has been retained-and build out the interior space in two phases. Much of the white exhibition walls in the building would be removed, creating more space and uncovering windows.

Conversion of the museum into a field house would mark the first such facility serving Near South Side residents. Nearby field houses include Daley Bicentennial Plaza, 337 E. Randolph, and Fosco Park, 1312 S. Racine.

Bob Foster, a park district project manager for the conversion, said he didn't yet know a date when the district would gain title to the building, nor an overall cost to make the changes.

Several series of negotiations about the acquisition are ongoing.

As part of the agreement, the veteran's art museum would relocate to the building's third floor for three to five years before moving into another permanent location. Mike Helbing, board president of the museum, said all sides are still negotiating over final terms.

"Suffice to say, we have equity," he said, referring to the building. "And basically we're utilizing that and working with the city and parks department."

Jorge Armando, owner of Café Society, the restaurant located in the front of the building, is bargaining with the park district about his lease. Armando said the lease he signed with the museum allowed him to operate his popular café through 2014, and he wants the district to honor the agreement.

It is not clear who will pay for development of the building, and Foster, from the park district, didn't name a number at the recent meeting. Second Ward Alderman Bob Fioretti estimated repair and stabilization costs of the building could run \$3 million to \$5 million.

Fioretti said he advocated using tax increment financing dollars for the project during a meeting last week between he and Tim Mitchell, the park district superintendent, and Gery Chico, the park district board president.

The city helped establish the museum in 1996, when it paid \$1.7 million for the former food storage facility.

The veteran's art museum has struggled to raise funds in recent years, and had brokered an agreement with a club to move into the space. The city precluded the agreement in the spring of 2007, moving to buy the building back from the museum.

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