

City officials worry proposed Discovery Center won't meet expectations

By Tyler Sharp

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The task for the proposed Flint Hills Discovery Center that will be a part of the southern Manhattan redevelopment project might appear a daunting one.

The museum, which has been an ongoing project for several years now, is projected to draw between 70,000-100,000 people per year — that is where City Commissioner Bob Strawn's cautious approach originates.

"I'm not against the [Center]; I have concerns about the merit," he said. "I will worry if it'll achieve what's expected, out of it. Will it have merit and will Manhattan adapt and support it as a hallmark of the community? Will it be a tax strain? Will it draw what it's projected to? Somebody has to show me it has merit."

Proving the merit of the Center has been an ongoing task since the Kansas Department of Commerce approved \$50 million in STAR (Sales Tax Revenue) bonds to the City of Manhattan in December 2006. According to the Department of Commerce's Web site, STAR bonds are provided to offer Kansas municipalities opportunities "... to issue bonds to finance the development of major commercial entertainment and tourism areas and use sales tax revenue generated by the development to pay off the

bonds."

Of the soon-to-be allotted STAR bonds, \$11 million will be set aside for construction, \$3 million will go toward consultants and related fees, \$12 million toward land acquisition, \$3 million will go toward infrastructure and the final \$11 million will account for accumulated interest on the bonds.

In an initial feasibility study by Canyon Research Southwest, Inc., a Tempe, Ariz., based company, the Flint Hills Discovery Center and the Downtown Manhattan Redevelopment District are forecasted to increase annual out-of-town visitation to the Manhattan area by 120,000 to 380,000 people. This influx of visitors will increase the demand for overnight accommodations by about 20,400 to 64,600 annual room nights. The money generated by out-of-town visitors is forecasted to account for about \$50 million of the Downtown Manhattan Redevelopment District's annual retail sales. This information forms the basis of city commissioner Bruce Sneed's support of the Discovery Center.

"I've been on the city commission throughout the downtown redevelopment project, and I've seen the interest folks have and the desire to increase tourism in the Flint Hills," he said. "The draw for nature-based tourism along with the location of

Manhattan and the presence of K-State in the community all present itself as a natural choice along with the STAR bond acceptance."

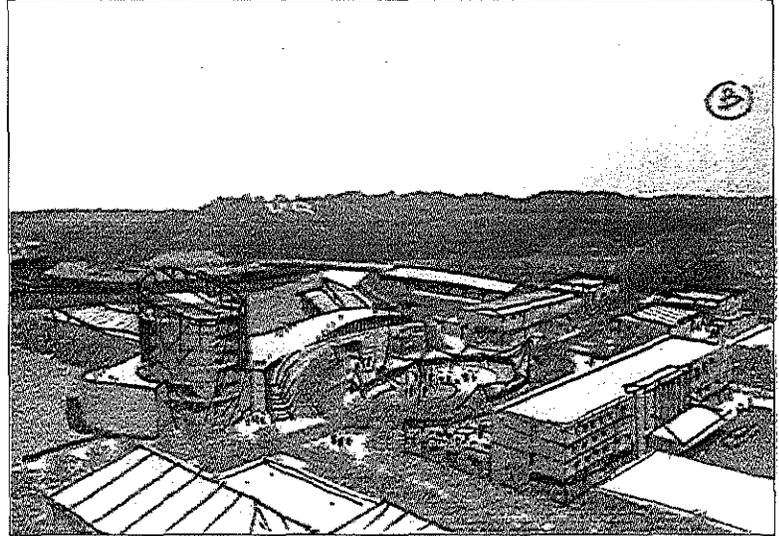
Featured exhibits in the Discovery Center will include an aquarium, interactive exhibits in which students can experience the prairie and other exhibits that will be determined by a consultant's study, Strawn said. He also said an exhibit has been purchased from the Smithsonian Institution.

"It speaks to native prairie, though I have not seen it myself," he said.

The Center will employ eight full-time employees and 18 part-time employees. Operating costs are estimated to run from \$600,000-\$700,000. Twenty-five thousand people visit the Mariana Kistler Beach Museum of Art annually, said Martha Scott, business and marketing manager.

Ablene's Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum is visited by an estimated 70,000 people every year, said Linda Smith, archive specialist for the museum and library.

Whether the center lives up to the claims of success that have accompanied it in preliminary studies is still up in the air. Lauren Ritterbush, associate professor in sociology, anthropology and social work, has served as a museum consultant in the past. She said she does not think



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the Center will be able to survive on its own.

"My observations of museums indicate to me that museums are not self-sustaining. They require outside funding, lots of it and consistently," she said in an e-mail interview. "I am not aware of any funding sources for this museum beyond limited admissions and city funds, which must also be applied to many other things."

The city commission is accepting bids for consulting

services to assist in the museum's development. The consulting service will help with exhibit and facility conceptual design. Proposals are due to the city by April 14.

Strawn said the consultant will likely come to K-State and inquire about aspects of the Center and whether or not it has merits.

Sneed said he knows many people associated with K-State have knowledge of the prairie and the science that the attractions will por-

tray; and he said he hopes they will provide their insight.

Strawn said if the consultants tell the commission that the Center does not have merit there will be "... a big argument and I will be standing on a chair, yelling lies."

But Sneed said he has faith in the Discovery Center.

"There are big challenges with the project, but it is a unique opportunity to help revitalize downtown and the community," he said.