

Riverfront museum plans gain focus; cost questions linger

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Supporters of a proposed York County museum overlooking the Catawba River have scaled back their grand visions in favor of a plan they say is more realistic.

But questions persist over the cost, where the money will come from and, in a new twist, how York County's Culture & Heritage Foundation will replace a development partner that left the project.

The Museum of Life and Environment, a concept that's been more than 10 years in the making, returned to the spotlight last week when backers unveiled to York County leaders new drawings and introduced a Columbia firm brought in to help develop the site.

Revised plans show a smaller, less expensive museum that leaves more of its features outdoors. The concept is now more achievable, said museum director Van Shields, the chief advocate for the project. "We kind of threw everything but the kitchen sink in there," Shields said. "We aimed very high, philosophically and conceptually. Now, we are where we want to be."

Organizers want to move ahead in phases, starting with an outdoor pavilion for school programs and a grassy clearing for concerts and public events. The attractions would link to the Carolina Thread Trail, slated to open next year along the river as part of a regional trail network that will span 15 counties. "It has been reeled in a little bit," York County Councilman Tom Smith said. "Not that their concept before wouldn't have worked, but I think what they're doing now will relate more to people. It identifies with the area and the county."

The museum itself would have a narrower focus on the Catawba Indians' role in local history.

In one proposed exhibit that illustrates the 1800s, a covered wagon pulled by a team of horses stands near a Native American hut. Another display depicts kitchens through various eras, from a primitive fireplace to a 1950s-style stove, refrigerator and countertop.

It's the latest incarnation of a plan that has been evolving for more than a decade.

Earlier concepts involved some eclectic ideas — and a price tag approaching \$67 million. At one point, museum leaders described models of a South American rainforest, the city of Las Vegas and a prototypical American suburb.

Now, Shields and a museum commission comprised of county residents don't give cost estimates, saying the final design process is just getting started.

"They looked at something that was too high of a level to get accomplished," said County Council Chairman Buddy Motz. "Everybody had high hopes and wanted to see it take place. It just wasn't workable because of the cost."

Key player backs out

The cast of players has evolved along with the covered wagons and kitchens.

Out is Cherokee Investment Partners, a nationally known development company once expected to play a major role in bringing the vision to reality. In is MB Kahn, a Columbia construction firm known for its work on Columbia's convention center and the Omnimax Theater at Discovery Place in Charlotte.

Cherokee was supposed to act as a partner to develop an environmentally friendly community around the museum. Plans called for 750 single-family homes, several hundred multifamily units and 50 acres of potential industrial and commercial development.

But the Raleigh, N.C.-based company pulled out amid the national housing collapse.

The museum group bought back the land from Cherokee this summer for \$3.78 million, less than the \$4.5 million Cherokee paid for it in 2006.

The dealings with Cherokee raised questions for County Councilman Joe Cox, a critic of the museum's practices.

"You got the property 10 years ago free and clear," Cox said. "Now you owe \$3.7 million on it. And nothing has been done."

Museum leaders portray the move as positive, saying it's a relief the land didn't get turned into home lots just before the economy turned rotten. The timing proved to be a "blessing," said Carol Moroska, a Wachovia executive who chairs the museum foundation.

The museum foundation now has sole control of the property, including 332 acres surrounding the museum site and 64 acres where the museum itself would be built.

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