

Report of the Blue Ribbon Commission for a
San Antonio/Bexar County History Center

January 2003

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BACKGROUND AND COMMISSION CHARGE

In late 2001, Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff and San Antonio Mayor Ed Garza jointly appointed the Commission to coordinate a feasibility study of a San Antonio History Center in the space occupied by the Hertzberg Circus Collection and Museum. This Center would showcase the history of San Antonio/Bexar County for scholars, researchers, genealogists, students, tourists and the general public. The Commission was charged to refine the concept for the History Center, research potential funding sources, and develop a proposed partnership structure for implementation including the City and County governments along with related public and nonprofit agencies and The University of Texas System. The City and the County each budgeted \$25,000 in FY 2002 for evaluation of the Hertzberg building, and the City has budgeted an additional \$125,000 in FY 2003 for preservation of the Hertzberg collection and further development of this project. Most of these funds remain available for these purposes.

The Commission established four subcommittees to conduct its work. One developed in greater detail the “model” for the History Center – its essential nature, role and scope of services. Another worked to identify and inventory the universe of existing materials that are relevant to the Center’s purpose. The third undertook a preliminary assessment of the physical infrastructure of the Hertzberg building to determine its suitability as a possible site. The fourth began exploring potential funding sources and funding mechanisms.

Commission members toured the Hertzberg building on several occasions. Members of the “Model” subcommittee gathered information on history centers in other major cities across the U.S., including their physical facilities, organizational form, budgets, staffing, and programming. In June, they also conducted two extensive discussion forums with a cross-section of stakeholders interested in preserving and interpreting local history. In August, Commission members conducted a half-day site visit and inspection of the Austin History Center, which has been suggested as one possible model for San Antonio. Finally, the Commission held a professionally facilitated half-day retreat in October to refine the members’ consensus on their findings and recommendations.

VISION

San Antonio is the most historic city in Texas. Yet it also stands out for its singular lack of a facility or entity that is dedicated to collecting, preserving, interpreting and presenting the extraordinary richness of its history in the fashion it deserves. The early Bexar Archives remain in Austin, still largely untranslated. We have no regional historical depository or archive to preserve and make accessible the wealth of history that is embodied in city and county government documents. Despite the efforts of many volunteer organizations, much of our history that is in private hands is being lost every day – deteriorating physically and even discarded in landfills. Residents, visitors and scholarly researchers alike have no single “entry point” that would orient them to the full scope of the historic resources that are scattered across Bexar County. These are injustices to ourselves.

The City of San Antonio and Bexar County share the obligation and responsibility to address these issues. They both have roles to play in collecting, preserving, archiving, and actively presenting this community's rich history to residents, students, visitors and researchers.

A San Antonio/Bexar County History Center that is worthy of our heritage needs to have two distinct components, to serve two more-or-less distinct constellations of interests. One is a state-of-the-art, interactive facility that is a "First Stop/Must See" for residents and visitors of all ages who want to be introduced to the rich history of this region in a broad-brush fashion, and who need an orientation to the documents and artifacts that can be found elsewhere throughout the county. This museum-like facility should be an interpretive learning center that is well designed and professionally curated, and that offers multi-lingual programs, permanent and changing exhibits, spoken/oral and interpretive histories, and extensive programs of community education/outreach and web-based access and presentation. It should be both an educational resource for San Antonio students and residents and a showcase that is at the center of San Antonio's visitor industry.

The second component is an archive, research and service center that serves the needs of researchers and scholars. It should archive and make accessible the historic documents of the city, the county and other local governments in the region. It should also be the center of a network linking and providing access to related institutional resources, and ensuring that local historical resources (including both documents and artifacts) are identified, collected and preserved appropriately.

These two components are both essential to the adequate preservation and presentation of our history, and they have these requirements in common:

- Ease of access (convenient and accessible location, adequate parking, good signage, handicapped access, etc.)
- Environmental controls geared to the needs of each particular component
- Physical and structural flexibility to accommodate rearrangement, expansion and technological adaptation
- Adequate mixed-use space (e.g., for exhibits, classrooms, meetings and events) and state-of-the-art technical and support services (e.g., document and artifact preservation, copy and reproduction services)
- Appropriate facilities and arrangements for user convenience and support (e.g., a gift shop and café in the visitor-oriented facility; comfortable work spaces and security provisions in the research-oriented facility).

Both components also require:

- Substantial professional and support staffing, with professional qualifications that have not traditionally been supported by the city and county governments
- Substantial funding – sustained beyond initial start-up - for long-term staffing, facility maintenance, and collection development, preservation and maintenance
- A deeply rooted commitment to inclusiveness, both in materials and resources and in the audiences addressed, and aggressive programming for community education and outreach.

However, these components are also somewhat distinct in the audiences they would address and in the expectations and requirements of these audiences. Therefore care must be taken to separate them functionally if they are to be located in the same physical facility.

THE HERTZBERG BUILDING

The building that has housed the Hertzberg Collection and Museum could be a nearly-ideal site for the museum and general introduction/orientation component of a local History Center. It appears to be adequate in size for this role, and its prominent location on the San Antonio Riverwalk is a major advantage. However, the building also needs substantial renovation and rehabilitation to bring it up to current code requirements, and it would need substantial further investment to redesign the interior to accommodate this new use. Parking for individual users is available immediately across the street, but the building's relatively constricted site makes bus parking (for school buses and others) a potential problem.

Other groups have expressed an interest in the Hertzberg facility for different but somewhat similar purposes – e.g., the Cowboy Artists of America, whose museum is now in Kerrville. And other sites for this element of the History Center could also be considered if this use of the Hertzberg is ultimately found infeasible. For example, one possibility is a partnership with the Witte Museum, which is exploring the potential to develop a western history center and which also needs to address its collection storage issues. Another might be in association with the Institute of Texan Cultures, as part of a museum complex in that corner of HemisFair Park.

In any case, the Hertzberg building is not adequate or appropriate for the archive/research facility. That facility would not benefit from the Hertzberg's location and combining the two facilities at one location would require a substantially larger building that is either purpose-built or substantially rebuilt to separate their distinctive functional requirements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The City and the County should appoint a successor to this Commission to carry planning for the History Center to the next stage. This Commission should have staff support and a budget for professional consultants.

Major required tasks include:

- o Resolve the deed restriction issue that requires the Hertzberg building to be used as “a public library.”
- o Develop a more detailed “program,” capital cost estimates, personnel requirements and estimated operating budgets for the components of the History Center. These first two items are urgent, in preparation for the recommendations below.
- o Develop a proposed funding plan for operation and maintenance, through a combination of public and private funding mechanisms (e.g., hotel/motel tax, document fees, endowments, grants, etc.).

- o Develop a governing structure including a separate policymaking board to manage the Center, and a required City-County agreement to create this structure. This may also require development and approval of new legislation.
 - o More thoroughly assess the universe of potentially available artifacts and documentary materials, and develop initial partnership and collaborative arrangements with related organizations and agencies.
 - o Pursue with state authorities the establishment of a regional archival depository serving San Antonio and the surrounding South Texas region.
- The City of San Antonio should include as a priority for its upcoming general obligation bond issue a proposition to rehabilitate the Hertzberg building and to equip it as the museum/general history/interpretive learning center component of the History Center. This is most appropriately the City's responsibility because the City owns the building and the City has the leading role in overall historic preservation, community and economic development.
 - Bexar County should include as a priority for its upcoming general obligation bond issue a proposition to acquire a site, design and construct a state-of-the-art facility for the archival/research component of the History Center. This is most appropriately the County's responsibility because the County is the custodian of such a large volume of basic records spanning three centuries.