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Springfield museum work wins approval

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SPRINGFIELD - The board of trustees overseeing the Springfield Museums announced Wednesday that it has voted to authorize the \$4.5 million second phase of the new Museum of Springfield History.

The second phase involves construction of a curved-roof, 45-foot high Great Hall addition to the former Verizon office building at Edwards and Chestnut streets, the site of the new museum. The two-story Verizon building has been renovated and an elevator to the second floor has been installed under the \$3 million first phase.

The new museum, across Edwards street from the Quadrangle in the heart of downtown Springfield, is scheduled to open to the public in fall 2009.

"This is a very exciting project," said J. Michael Wallace, board chairman of the Springfield Museums. "It's the first new museum to be built at the Quadrangle in 75 years. Now we'll be able tell Springfield's story as it deserves to be told."

Local officials praised the project, saying it will help residents connect with the city's history and provide a strong, new attraction for tourists.

"I think it's awesome," said Mary Kay Wydra, director of the Greater Springfield Convention and Visitors Bureau. "We know that visitors are looking for this type of attraction. That makes our job easier in selling the region."

The Great Hall building will include a new entryway and exhibit space for large objects such as Springfield-built automobiles and the 1937 Zeta aircraft, one of only three remaining Springfield built Gee Bee airplanes.

Exhibits will describe Springfield's development as a manufacturing center, the city's role in transportation history, the many inventions and firsts that were generated here, the growth of downtown as the region's commercial center, the effects of urbanization and suburbanization, and the stories of Springfield's diverse populations, the trustees stated in a prepared release.

A highlight of the new museum will be the Indian Motorcycle collection which has been donated to the Springfield Museums by Esta K. Manthos, the owner and director of the former Indian Motorcycle Museum on Hendee Street.

"With this new museum, we will be able to show the full range of Springfield's inventions and industrial production over the last 200 years," said Guy A. McLain, director of history museums. "A community needs to know its history and needs to be connected to its history. What these exhibits will allow people to do is celebrate the great inventions and innovations that have come out of this community."

McLain said the museum and Springfield's rich history will be a great draw for visitors from "from around the region, around the country."

Mayor Domenic J. Sarno said the museum will have a "tremendous impact on the local economy."

The city has a museum and library system that is the "envy of many cities our size, if not larger," he said.

The new museum was made possible by a major fundraising effort including private donations, a state Cultural Facilities Fund grant, corporate support and foundation grants.

In addition, the Springfield Museums were recently awarded a \$600,000 challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities toward the construction of the new museum.

The Museums still need to raise \$1.9 million to meet the 4-to-1 matching requirements of the grant. Donations can be made by calling (413) 263-6800, Ext. 255.

The Springfield Museums is a private, nonprofit organization. In addition to the new Museum of Springfield History, the organization includes the Michele and Donald D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts, the Springfield Science Museum, the George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum, the Connecticut Valley Historical Museum, and the Dr. Seuss National Memorial Sculpture Garden.

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