

# Fort Smith Seeks Funds For Marshals Museum

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Now that Fort Smith has locked in the future U.S. Marshals Service National Museum, local officials have begun the search for funding, turning to the state and national governments as well as private sources.

Claude Legris, executive director of the Fort Smith Convention & Visitors Bureau and co-chair of the future museum's steering committee, said the museum will initially need \$26.4 million in start-up funding, a rough estimate that would cover the costs of bringing in site consultants and architects.

That amount could also cover some of the museum's construction, which Legris said won't begin any earlier than 24 months from now.

Last month, Rep. Jim Medley of Fort Smith stepped up to ask the Arkansas General Assembly to foot the bill for virtually all of the museum's start-up costs. On Feb. 20 he filed a bill, HB 1590, to appropriate \$25 million from the General Improvement Fund to the Department of Parks & Tourism for the planning, development and construction of the museum.

The next day Rep. Tracy Pennartz, also of Fort Smith, filed a separate bill, HB 1634, requesting that \$10 million be appropriated from the GIF specifically for the museum's construction.

Pennartz said her bill gives the museum another chance at funding. She and Medley have co-sponsored each other's bills.

According to Legris, several legislators, not just those from the state's western delegation, have expressed support for funding the museum. Gov. Mike Beebe has publicly stated that he sees the museum as a statewide project and supports legislation to fund it.

GIF appropriations for local projects have come under heightened scrutiny since a December decision by the state Supreme Court struck down a \$400,000 appropriation to the city of Bigelow for a street improvement project. The court said

the appropriation violated the 14th Amendment to the Arkansas Constitution, which prohibits special and local legislation.

But Legris said the Marshals Service museum really is a statewide project. Actually, it's a national project.

Legris said Fort Smith was chosen, in part, because of the link the U.S. Marshals Service has to local history, including the infamous "Hanging Judge," U.S. District Judge Isaac Parker. But, he said, the museum's exhibits will go beyond the scope of the Parker era.

"We understand that this is supposed to be a national museum, and it will cover all 217 years of the Marshals Service, which is the oldest law enforcement organization in the country, established by Senate Bill No. 1," Legris said.

Since it is a national project, Legris said, he and other local officials are launching a national campaign to raise at least \$8 million in corporate and private contributions for the construction and ongoing operation of the museum.

"At this date, our plans don't call on us in any way to depend on tax dollars for the operation of this facility. We intend for this facility to be privately endowed and for operating funds to be derived from that endowment, as well as privately contributed revenue and earned revenues," Legris said.

In November, the Fort Smith Museum Development Foundation was incorporated. However, the foundation did not begin accepting donations until after it was announced on Jan. 7 that Fort Smith would be the future home of the Marshals museum.

The museum might also be eligible for some federal funding. Legris said the museum's steering committee is working to get specific information on the museum's needs to Arkansas' Washington delegation before the next deadline for federal appropriations in mid-March.

At least the museum likely won't have to purchase the land where it will reside. Local businessmen Bennie Westphal will donate the museum's choice of two tracts of land in Fort Smith for the museum's location: a 25-acre tract along Clayton Expressway near the Riverfront Park or property facing the gallows at the Fort

Smith National Historic Site. Westphal is donating the land in honor of his ancestor, U.S. Deputy Marshal William Pitcock.

Fort Smith already draws about 75,000 visitors annually. Legris said the Marshals Service Museum could attract another 75,000.

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