

Legislators seeking money for museum



Fort Smith lawmakers hope for cut of budget surplus to build marshals archive

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette 20 Feb 2007 BY LAURA KELLAMS

Fort Smith lawmakers hope to get the Legislature to set aside some of the state's budget surplus to help build the long-sought federal marshals museum.

State Rep. Jim Medley, a Fort Smith Republican, said Monday that he will ask for \$25 million to go to the state Department of Parks and Tourism to pay for planning or construction of the museum in Fort Smith.

As legislative leaders hash out how and whether to divvy up surplus money in the General Improvement Fund for local projects, Medley said they should consider the museum as worthy of a cut off the top.

"I see this as part of a midAmerica touring package," he said. Medley said it's not a stretch to imagine tourists visiting Graceland in Mem-

phis, the Clinton Presidential Center in Little Rock and then hitting the marshals museum on their way to Oklahoma City's National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum.

"There's a lot to be said to wooing America ... to come make that tour," he said.

City promoters are looking to Gov. Mike Beebe for help. He's scheduled to visit Fort Smith this evening to meet John F. Clark, director of the U.S. Marshals Service, who will be in town to learn more about the museum plans.

Rep. Frank Glidewell, R-Fort Smith, said he hopes that means that Beebe will be on board with at least some measure of state funding for construction and planning.

Matt DeCample, Beebe's spokesman, said it's too early to say. He said Beebe won't review such capital project requests until after it's determined how much of the anticipated \$843 million surplus will be needed for public school building improvements.

"We're not looking at any of these... until we have education taken care

of,” DeCample said.

Fort Smith promoters fought for years to land the museum and found out last month that their proposal was chosen by federal officials over Staunton, Va., as the site. Planners say it’s too soon to know how much it will cost, but they’ve talked about a 30,000-square-foot building that might cost \$20 million to build.

Claude Legris, co-chairman of the steering committee, said planners have to go ahead and ask for state funding now, while everything is still in flux, because they know the General Assembly won’t be back in regular session until 2009. He said the idea is to get money from a variety of sources nationwide, including private funding and, hopefully, state and federal funding.

Tracy Winchell, Fort Smith’s economic development coordinator, said museum planners would be happy to receive any amount from the Legislature.

“I can guarantee you what we’re not going to do is go to them every year and say, ‘Give us money to operate this,’” she said.

The Marshals Service insisted that the museum be planned only as a self-sustaining project, meaning its operation will be funded through endowments, attendance fees and merchandise, she said.

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