

## Fresno's African American museum, Housing Authority partner on new mixed-use building

By Andrea Castillo



Gregory Melancon, curator and historian at the African American Historical and Cultural Museum, stands in the Jack A. Kelley Gallery on the first floor of the building in downtown Fresno. Museum leaders recently announced they will collaborate with the Fresno Housing Authority to build a new museum.

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Fresno's [African American Historical and Cultural Museum](#) could see a new museum building — and more — rise from the site of its existing facility as part of a collaboration with the [Fresno Housing Authority](#).

Officials said the project is in early stages, but could consist of a 5,000-square-foot museum with housing units above or wrapping it, replacing the current building at 1857 Fulton St. Museum leaders announced the partnership during their annual Black History Month celebration last Saturday.

The two organizations have worked throughout the past year to determine whether their idea is feasible. They hired an architect to develop renderings of the mixed-use building.

"We're trying to expand the vision so the next generation has more in place," said Julia Dudley-Najieb, president of the museum's board of directors.

Here's what museum leaders are striving for:

- Temperature and humidity control to protect the artwork and artifacts

- Movable walls to create flexible space
- Higher ceilings for bigger art pieces
- Upgraded technology
- A stage area for performing artists
- A community courtyard for concerts

Dudley-Najieb said archiving some artifacts and instead presenting them digitally would free up space for more traveling exhibits. And the current 8,000-square-foot facility, with its permanent walls, limits how creative the museum can get in presenting artworks.

The museum has a small auditorium that fits about 80 people. Dudley-Najieb hopes the new space would triple that amount.

Plans for revamping the museum include extending its mission. Dudley-Najieb hopes the museum can become more of a learning place, bringing in community artists to work with youth or host wine and painting nights with adults.

She said the board also wants to bring in exhibits from other cultures to attract more people and bring in more money.

“So often we (African-Americans) separate ourselves and that’s OK because America is a big melting pot,” she said, “but it’s even better if we get a chance to learn about those different cultures.”

Linda Cano, former [executive director](#) of the Fresno Art Museum who now owns [Axis Art Consulting](#), has consulted museum leaders about layout design and how to expand what they offer. She said the current plan, which could change, helps the museum broaden its appeal.

“This is another very positive change coming to downtown that will further define it as a major destination for art and culture,” she said.

Housing Authority executive director Preston Prince said his agency has yet to determine what the housing side of the building could look like. There’s potential to do mixed affordable and market-rate housing, he said, but the decision would depend on studying the market dynamics downtown.

Prince said the team still has to analyze how much the project could cost, but he said the current proposal is for Housing Authority to buy the land the museum sits on and give the museum the proceeds to build the new facility. He estimated that could cover one-third of the cost. The museum would have to come up with a fundraising plan for the rest.

Because the museum was originally financed through city and county funds, Prince said, the building has to stay in place through 2017. He said the extra time will allow the team to figure out how best to proceed.

Former executive director Gregory Melancon said the museum has been struggling since the recession started in 2008. He moved to Los Angeles late last year, but agreed to stay on as curator and event coordinator.

Melancon thinks a new building would generate excitement in the community and hopefully translate to more funding and visitors.

“Anytime there’s something new people always run to it,” he said. “I think it’ll have a significant impact.”

Prince said the idea to work together on a new facility came about through the museum’s existing partnership with Housing Authority. Children living in Housing Authority homes go there to learn about African-American history. But the building is old and expensive to operate.

“I find the museum to be an amazing asset,” he said. “The museum is really meeting the mission of the Housing Authority: It’s creating a vibrant community.”

Prince said he wants to help ensure that asset exists for years to come.

The museum started in 1985 as the brainchild of the late Jack Kelley, Fresno Police Department’s first black sergeant. It has operated out of the Fulton Street location since 1993. The building, a former financial institution, has existed since 1956.

Kelley said in a 1989 Bee article that blacks from North Carolina first relocated to the Fowler area around the turn of the 20th century to harvest grapes. His goal was to highlight black success since then, including the stories of those who became millionaires.

“We want to tell a story,” he said at the time. “We want to leave better relations with all other groups. We want this to be about black people, successful black people. But it is designed for everybody.”

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