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Two local developers are trumpeting a plan to build a music museum on Canal Street as having greater economic potential than the failed Grammy project.

BYLINE: By Rebecca Mowbray, Business writer

BODY:

Undaunted by the failure of the Grammy museum project, a pair of local developers hopes to build an interactive museum and performance venue for Louisiana music in the State Palace Theatre building on Canal Street.

The proposed \$55 million project, called the **Louisiana Music Experience**, would combine local music memorabilia and interactive exhibits with a live concert venue where visitors could hear the music they learned about in the museum.

After the Grammy project crumbled in the fall of 2003 because the new leadership at the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences failed to endorse the concept of building a pop music temple along the Mississippi River in New Orleans, developers Troy Von Otnott of Entertainment Realty Inc. and Pres Kabacoff of HRI Properties Inc. decided to see whether they could spin all of their work on the Grammy project into a new project.

They settled on a project that would celebrate jazz, gospel, blues, R&B, Cajun and early rock 'n' roll music and could serve as an anchor for spreading development up Canal Street and over to Rampart Street.

"One of the huge things we didn't like about the Grammy project is that there wasn't enough focus on indigenous music," Von Otnott said. "At the end of the day, we're going to come out with a better project that has more economic impact for the city."

The museum would include 25,000 square feet of exhibit space, a restaurant, retail store, special-event space, and a computer center with a digital archive of Louisiana music, plus a 1,500- to 1,700-seat concert hall that the developers hope will become the home of the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra.

If the plan becomes a reality at 1108 Canal St., the developers would scale back the current size of the

State Palace Theatre to make it better suited to jazz performances, and to reduce rivalry with nearby venues such as the Saenger Theatre.

The developers hope that the strong connection to local culture and having a performance venue attached to the museum will distinguish the project from other music museums such as the Experience Music Project in Seattle and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland.

"A large percentage of the people who visit New Orleans come here for some sort of music experience. Unfortunately, if they come with their family, and their children are under 18, they won't be able to experience it, because the only place you can experience the music would be in the clubs," Von Otnott said. "We're missing a real cultural marketing opportunity."

Kabacoff said that concerts at the **Louisiana Music Experience** would ensure that locals would make repeat visits, and would open up educational programming opportunities with local schools. The group hopes the museum will host about 500,000 visitors a year.

"I don't think the Grammy project had the same intrigue and relevance to New Orleans and the state of Louisiana that this project has," Kabacoff said.

The developers plan to pursue a Smithsonian affiliation for the project, Von Otnott said. They have hired the Washington, D.C., design firm Gallagher & Associates to handle the exhibit design. Gallagher worked on the expansion of the National D-Day Museum in New Orleans and the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C., as well as the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Ronald Markham Jr., president and chief executive officer of the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra, the nonprofit jazz orchestra based at Dillard University and conducted by trumpeter Irvin Mayfield, said his group is very excited about the prospect of having a permanent home at the music museum.

"The idea of working with **Louisiana Music Experience** is mutually beneficial," Markham said. "We don't have a home."

Right now, the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra plays about 15 concerts a year at a variety of facilities around the city, not all of which are well-suited to jazz. For the next few years, the Jazz Orchestra will play lots of dates across the country under a new deal with a large booking agency, and Markham hopes that his group's rigorous touring schedule will win it lots of new fans who will want to travel to New Orleans to learn more about Louisiana music. Having a home at the music museum would help the Jazz Orchestra build a loyal following and educate those fans about jazz.

"The Jazz Orchestra will be functioning as ambassadors of fine New Orleans art," Markham said. "People can't be informed about an art form without institutions to forward it."

The project will make money from ticket, food and beverage sales. One thing that makes the project more feasible than the Grammy project is that developers won't have to secure permission from the Recording Academy on the recordings, they can just work with the Louisiana artists.

Over the next four months, the developers hope to refine their business plan and museum concept and work out detailed plans for the building. The developers have an option on the building.

Of course, the big hurdle is money. The developers believe they will need about \$10 million from the state and \$5 million from the city, the same amount each entity had contributed to the Grammy project, with the balance of the development cost coming from bond sales handled by the Denver finance

company General Motors Acceptance Corp., which had been slated to handle the financing for the Grammy project. Most likely, the project would be publicly owned if it is built, the developers said.

Von Otnott said the developers already have made a request to be put in the state capital outlay budget for the spring legislative session, and they have met with representatives of Mayor Ray Nagin.

But whether the state and city will go along with the project remains to be seen.

The **Louisiana Music Experience** is in competition with many other "compelling projects" that were presented by New Orleans area legislative and city leaders last fall, said Roderick Hawkins, deputy press secretary to Gov. Kathleen Blanco.

"We have to keep in mind that the capital outlay budget is pretty tight, and there are always more requests than there are funds available," Hawkins said. "At this point, no commitment has been made to fund the specific project at this time."

Ernest Collins, arts and entertainment director for the city of New Orleans, sat in on a brainstorming session with project consultants a few weeks ago. Collins said the Nagin administration believes that a music museum could be a key part of the efforts to redevelop Canal Street and launch an entertainment district along Rampart Street.

But the source of money that had previously been committed to the Grammy project no longer is available, Collins said, and the mayor still is evaluating whether this is the best opportunity to develop a music museum. He wants to hear more about the business plan.

"I think he's very open to doing this type of project, but he has to see the right project, and the right relationship with the participants," Collins said.

GRAPHIC: STAFF PHOTO BY TED JACKSON

Plans for a Grammy museum have been transformed into a proposal to create the **Louisiana Music Experience**. Developers envision an interactive music museum at the State Palace Theatre, formerly the Loews State, on Canal Street, complete with a digital music archive and performance venue.
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