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Times-Picayune (New Orleans, LA)

December 13, 2003 Saturday

SECTION: NATIONAL; Pg. 1

LENGTH: 1048 words

HEADLINE: Grammy group says it doesn't want museum

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BODY:

The National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences Inc. has rejected a proposal to build a **Grammy** Awards museum in New Orleans, formally killing an idea that had been floating around since the 1980s.

Although the proposal had sputtered, it recently gained momentum under the direction of developer Pres Kabacoff and his company, HRI Properties.

The Recording Academy, which sent representatives to New Orleans on Nov. 14 to hear a proposal from an all-star cast of elected officials, business leaders and musicians, faxed a polite but vague three-page letter that Kabacoff first saw Friday morning. It said that the academy simply wasn't interested in developing a pop music museum.

"After due deliberation, the Recording Academy has made a final determination to not proceed with a Grammy Exposition and Hall of Fame in New Orleans," wrote Neil Portnow, the Los Angeles group's president. "Having reached that decision, we want to emphasize that while the Recording Academy has decided not to further pursue a Grammy Exposition and Hall of Fame project in New Orleans, we salute the City of New Orleans and the State for Louisiana for their generous support of the proposed project, and we again thank all those who worked so hard and diligently in this effort."

The letter said a small group of leaders reviewed the matter, but it did not say that the matter ever came up at a board meeting. The letter went on to say that "outstanding issues remain unresolved," and cited issues with the lease, intellectual property, feasibility, bond financing, a construction contract and an operating agreement.

But those involved with putting together the proposal say that those concerns sound like red herrings. Such details are normally worked out after a preliminary agreement has been reached.

"There was no way to strike a deal until NARAS said, 'This is something we'd like to do,' " Kabacoff said.

The proposed \$85 million museum was envisioned as a high-tech, interactive temple of pop music that would draw visitors from around the world to learn about the musicians and musical genres that have

been honored with Grammy Awards. Right now there is no venue to house the awards that are given out each year, and New Orleans was proposed as a site because so many forms of American music find their roots here.

The Grammy museum proposal took off in 2001, and appeared nearly certain until the Recording Academy's former president, Michael Greene, abruptly resigned in April 2002 amid allegations of sexual harassment. The project went into a tailspin when the academy remained without a leader until last December. After that, Portnow chose to focus on boosting the sagging ratings of the Grammy Awards TV program and reassess the organization's other priorities.

Kabacoff took over a few months ago as lead developer after the academy voiced concerns about the lack of experience of an earlier developer, Troy Von Otnott. Kabacoff heads a high-profile company that has a record of working on difficult public-private projects, such as the St. Thomas Wal-Mart development.

Kabacoff choreographed a presentation at the Hilton the day before the gubernatorial election last month that included music by singer Aaron Neville and trumpeter Irvin Mayfield; and testimonials from New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival producer Quint Davis; Dillard University's Institute of Jazz Culture representative Henry Lacey; jazz educator Ellis Marsalis; musician Allen Toussaint; Audubon Nature Institute president and head of the New Orleans Regional Chamber of Commerce, Ron Forman; MetroVision Chairman Bill Hines; New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau President Steve Perry; Harrah's New Orleans Casino General Manager John Payne; Hornets co-owner Ray Wooldridge; Saints Executive Vice President of Administration Arnold Fielkow; City Council President Oliver Thomas; City Councilman Marlin Gusman; Mayor Ray Nagin; Arts & Entertainment Director Ernest Collins; and Lt. Gov.-elect Mitch Landrieu, among others. When the sound quality turned out poorly on a tape made of the event to send to Los Angeles, the coalition came together to restate their messages on a new tape, and Gov.-elect Kathleen Blanco added her pitch.

The state had committed \$9.9 million to the project, and the city had pledged \$7.5 million spread out across 10 years. The rest of the money was to come from the sale of \$70 million in bonds approved by the State Bond Commission.

Bernie Cyrus, executive director of the Louisiana Music Commission, was crushed at the news that the Grammy museum was dead. He'd been working on the idea of getting a national music museum in New Orleans since 1986, when he proposed that the Rock 'n Roll Hall of Fame, which was eventually built in Cleveland, locate here.

"I think our proposal and our tape never saw the light of day before the general membership," Cyrus said while waiting to meet with Landrieu to discuss how to proceed with new ideas for a music museum. "I'm convinced that if the producers, writers and artists who make up the organization saw it, it would have been a slam dunk."

Recording Academy spokesman Ron Roecker said the academy would have no comment on the matter beyond the letter.

Kabacoff said he harbors no ill feelings toward the Recording Academy, and is moving forward with his proposal for a 10-acre mixed residential, retail and entertainment development that was to surround the Grammy project in the parking lot between the Hilton New Orleans Riverside hotel and the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. "We took our best shot, it didn't work and I'm not looking back," he said.

New Orleans may have failed to get the Grammy museum, but Kabacoff hopes that the coalition of

political and business leaders that came together to woo the Recording Academy delegation can stay together and bounce back in the same way that a similar coalition of leaders continued to look for a professional basketball team after failing to lure the Timberwolves, and eventually netted the Hornets.

"They're now organized and ready to go," Kabacoff said. "This community is now focused on music business opportunities."

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LOAD-DATE: December 13, 2003