Experts stress museum’s potential tourism boost

BY AARON E. LOONEY
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DONALDSONVILLE — Authorities in the fields of cultural history and economic development outlined Saturday benefits that the River Road African American Museum brings to the city and surrounding areas.

Discussion during the “town hall” event at the city’s municipal building also touched on the museum’s planned expansion, a proposed 99-year lease agreement between the city and the museum for the site and renovation of numerous buildings tied to the area’s black history.

Deborah Mack, a representative of the Association of African American Museums, said her agency is “very interested” in helping the museum expand its services.

The field of heritage tourism is rapidly growing across the nation, and African American heritage tourism is at the leading edge,” Mack said. “You have a lot of history here in Donaldsonville, a lot of stories and collections here that need to be displayed.”

Mack said that officials with the Smithsonian Institute’s upcoming African American museum have expressed interest in documenting the historical relevance of Donaldsonville.

Joe McGill, a program officer for the National Trust for Historic Preservation, said that the museum’s recent acquisition of a former Rosenwald School building brings with it a vital tool in presenting black history.

“Rosenwald Schools are few and far between nowadays,” McGill said. “Having one here in Donaldsonville is very significant.”

The building, which was moved to Donaldsonville from nearby Convent, is one of 400 built in Louisiana by the Rosenwald rural school building program, an effort between Sears Roebuck founder Julius Rosenwald and black education pioneer Booker T. Washington in the early 20th century.

Panelist Kathe Hambrick Jackson, executive director of the River Road African American Museum, said the building is the only structurally intact Rosenwald School in the state. McGill said that her agency partnered with the Lowe’s home improvement store chain last year to distribute $1 million to restore Rosenwald Schools nationwide.

Donaldsonville Mayor Leroy Sullivan answers a question during a ‘town hall’ meeting concerning the River Road African American Museum in Donaldsonville on Saturday. A panel of experts involved with museum planning discussed the importance of the museum and some of the setbacks in growth the museum faces because of recent hurricanes and rising construction costs.

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restore the museum’s school building.

Panelist John Hankins, an economic development consultant based in New Orleans, said the city and museum working together would increase tourism in the area.

“There are people we call ‘windshield tourists,’” Hankins said. “They pass by Donaldsonville, see it from their cars and keep going. Your goal is to get those people to stop here, learn about the rich history and ultimately spend their money here. You have a great tool to do that with this museum.”

Solidifying the relationship with a long-term lease would help, Hankins said.

Jackson and members of city government present at the meeting stressed that the lease issue is not hindering the museum’s progress.

“We need to find an architect that can help us with the design,” Jackson said, adding that two previous design proposals were scrapped in the aftermath of recent hurricanes and the design firms’ decisions to pull out of the projects.

The proposed lease is scheduled to be introduced during the City Council’s meeting Tuesday, with a public hearing to possibly follow in January, Mayor Leroy Sullivan Sr. said.