GWU presents designs for intended museum building

By BRADY HOLT
Current Staff Writer

The museum George Washington University hopes to construct on its campus will be three stories of limestone topped with a level of glass-faced office space, according to design renderings officials presented last week.

As part of its campus plan, the university received preliminary zoning approval to construct a 65-foot-high museum on the site of an existing rose garden in the 700 block of 21st Street. The museum will house a donated collection of Washingtoniana artifacts and materials the university already owns. Additionally, the Textile Museum will relocate from Sheridan-Kalorama to space in the new facility.

As planned, the museum will attach to the historic Woodhull House, and part of that building will also become exhibit space. Street-level access to the block’s central plaza space would remain. The museum’s primary visitor entrance and internal loading dock would be accessed from 21st Street.

Both the District’s Zoning Commission and Historic Preservation Review Board must review the impact of the building plans at a later date, but the historic review aims to ensure the plans do not touch street-facing office space, according to planning documents.

The museum will include textile and Washingtoniana collections. The museum will be a donated collection of materials the university already owns.

Mayor Vincent Gray told the Chevy Chase Citizens Association Thursday evening that the District expects to record a surplus of between $100 million and $125 million for the just-completed 2011 fiscal year.

He also discussed issues in education, public safety and job creation, as well as health care for the city’s less fortunate.

Establishing a stable fiscal environment, Gray told the group, is one of his four top priorities, especially as the city has not had a truly balanced budget for several years.

The city’s fund balance, he said, fell from $1.6 billion to $800 million during the Fenty administration. Most of the remainder cannot be touched, he added, as it is required either for protecting outstanding bonds or by order of Congress.

Thanks to the city’s strong credit rating and favorable market conditions, Gray said, the District was able to sell $800 million worth of short-term bonds at an interest rate of 0.27 percent to finance its expenses until tax revenues are received.

But Gray stressed that those revenues must be collected fairly. To applause, the mayor said he disapproved of the idea of taxing out-of-state municipal bonds that had been purchased prior to the legislation taking effect, as it is inappropriate to have a retroactive tax.

Gray also touted his bona fides in promoting education reform, particularly early-childhood schooling.

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Volunteers help restore the fence surrounding the northernmost boundary stone.

Bill Petros/The Current

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GRAY
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through the city council.”

The mayor pointed out he had pushed legislation through the council for all District 3- and 4-year-olds to have access to preschool, noting that key brain development takes place before age 5.

Answering a question about ensuring the quality of the programs, he said the programs would increasingly fall under the auspices of public or charter schools rather than nonprofits, which have offered inconsistent results. “There was a group of very nice people who were not prepared,” Gray recalled.

The mayor said he plans to expand the city’s offerings to include a program for children as young as six months. The children will be read to and enjoy what children from better educated families receive, said Gray, adding that nonprofits could be very helpful in this area.

“If you reach the kids earlier, you’re going to do better... Hearing words is how you build vocabulary.”

The city, he said, will reap the benefits 10 to 15 years down the road.

Gray also announced progress in special-education spending. By next September, he said, the city will reduce expenses by $25 million to $30 million; it now spends $160 million on private schools plus $90 million on transportation. The savings, he said, will be reinvested in education.

Gray also boasted of an area in which he has increased spending — reopening the city’s police academy, which was temporarily shut down due to budget cuts when Gray entered office.

Now, the academy will train 300 new officers to more than make up for the 120 who leave the system each year. By year’s end there will be 3,200 officers; the goal, he said, is to have 3,800.

Despite those hires, the key to ending the city’s 11 percent unemployment rate is the private sector, said Gray, who added that he is personally calling on firms to come here and to stay here.

And one project — stalled in that pipeline for years — is already doing so, he noted. After a massive infusion of capital from the government of Qatar, construction is finally under way at the site of the old convention center. According to projections, CityCenterDC will lead to 3,000 construction jobs and 3,000 new permanent jobs.

And there’s more good news in Shaw, Gray noted: The O Street Market development will break ground in mid-November.

Gray also reported progress in keeping residents healthy. Asked about health care in wards 7 and 8, he said there soon will be three new clinics east of the Anacostia River. With only 3.2 percent of the District’s children not covered by some kind of insurance, “the problem is access, not coverage.”