

# Venice needs larger home for its history

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In the movie "Field of Dreams," a voice tells Iowa farmer Ray Kinsella that if he builds it, they will come.

Regarding the sharing of Venice's unique heritage, it would seem the opposite has occurred. The increasing demand of residents and visitors to learn more about our city's history has outstripped the community's ability to keep pace.

Collecting and documenting Venice's heritage began about three decades ago with a small group of citizens who clipped newspaper articles and stored them, along with donated photographs and other documents, in a closet at the Venice Library.

As the collection of archival objects grew, space was made available in a room at City Hall to display some of the memorabilia.

In 1991, the City of Venice purchased the Triangle Inn and moved the 1927 structure to its present location on the Cultural Campus. The building's second floor was modified to house the Venice Museum & Archives, while the first floor provided exhibit space for objects in the museum's collection.

During the past quarter century, museum staff have rotated exhibits in that space to help tell the city's history. Because the exhibit space is so small, however, about the size of a modern living room, only a small portion of the city's 90-year history can be displayed at any one time.

As Venice has grown in both the number of residents and tourists, so has the interest in the city's history. Consider, for example, that the number of visitors to the Triangle Inn has quadrupled during the past decade.

An average 13,000 online searches of the archives' database are conducted each year. And last year, museum staff and volunteers conducted nearly 60 research requests.

The archival collection has also increased to more than 40,000 objects. An engineering study conducted last year determined that those objects, which were stored on the second floor of the Triangle Inn, were causing the floor to sag under the weight.

As a result, those objects had to be relocated to several less-than-suitable locations

throughout the area.

Venice received a wonderful gift this past April when philanthropist Julia Cousins Laning provided the funds to purchase and convert a building on Milan Avenue, across the street from the past and future Venice Library, into a state-of-the-art archives where the museum's entire collection will eventually be stored.

The city now has another wonderful opportunity within its grasp: to repurpose the Hamilton Building into an expanded Venice History Museum once the Sarasota County Library vacates the structure and moves into its new facility next year.

The city purchased the 9,000-square-foot condominium office complex in August 2015, and the county spent more than \$400,000 renovating the structure and converting it into space that could be used as a temporary library.

More than three-fourths of the building's available space is ideal for exhibits. And more than \$300,000 of private funds have been identified to convert the building into a history museum, should the city choose to exercise that option.

In addition to available exhibit space, the roughly 1,500 square feet of office and conference space would be sufficient to house historical resources staff and volunteers as well as a gift shop for selling merchandise related to Venice history.

Much like the existing Cultural Campus, the parking area connecting both the Hamilton Building and the Venice Theatre would lend itself to a myriad of cultural events. And with the city's recent articulation agreement with the Florida Department of Transportation, even more parking spaces will soon be added under the KMI Bridge.

The City of Venice allocates less than one percent of its annual operating budget to historic resources. This in a state where historic preservation is a \$6.3 billion industry.

Promoting our unique heritage offers a perfect opportunity to entertain, educate and engage both our residents and visitors alike. Repurposing the Hamilton Building into a suitable home for our history is an idea whose time has come.

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