

Mayor Mary Verner
City of Spokane
808 W. Spokane Falls BLVD
Spokane, WA 99201

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Spokane, WA 99201

Proposal for the old YMCA building in Riverfront Park

Hello Ms. Verner and Mr. Cooley:

I know the City is seeking proposals for the redevelopment of the YMCA building at 507 N. Howard from qualified developers with “significant urban mixed use experience.” I am not qualified. BUT I would like to plant the seed of an idea for the building that would create jobs in Spokane and definitely benefit all the citizens of Spokane and the surrounding area, be a tourist destination point and a source of pride for Spokane: Please consider the rebirth of the **Museum of Native American Cultures**.

It might be a well kept secret that Spokane is sitting on a treasure. Ninety percent of the amazing world class collection from the former Museum of Native American Cultures (MONAC), once located on the southwest corner of Gonzaga University’s campus, is still in Spokane! It has not been exhibited en masse for almost 20 years. Much of the outstanding collection was never even exhibited at MONAC due to a lack of space, but was stored in the large vault in the museum’s basement. This magnificent collection rivals those held by the major museums of the world and its Plateau culture collection is unparalleled.

What can the museum add to Downtown?

Please consider what a museum of this caliber could mean to a city like Spokane. The City has come so far in the revitalization and redevelopment of Downtown, which has become a jewel of the Inland Northwest. Downtown there are excellent restaurants, shopping, hotels, park facilities and convention/entertainment facilities. In the last few years there has been a surge in residential development with the addition of many condominiums and upscale apartments. The Kendall Yards project promises more of this positive and exciting development. Let’s do something different with this prime riverfront property that will benefit *ALL* Spokane’s citizens, create a more sophisticated cosmopolitan city center, and give everyone more reason to come Downtown.

Why is the YMCA building a great location?

I cannot think of a better location for the museum than right in the center of Downtown on the very river and falls that were such a center of Native American fishing and trade. Called *s-tlhetk^w* (Fast Water) in the Salish language, this locale offers a beautiful, exciting and historic location for the proposed museum. The fact that the museum would be easily accessed by foot or bicycle from within

Riverfront Park is great. The limited parking ought not pose a significant problem for patrons as there are many available spaces in pay lots, River Park Square Parking Garage and zones for bus drop off for tour and school groups. Considering the many wonderful events held Downtown--and in Riverfront Park particularly--throughout the year as well as the overall traffic of shoppers, park goers, convention participants and tourists, I would think there would be plenty of interest in what such a museum could offer.

What the museum could offer to the public:

- Artifact galleries for each cultural area, galleries for special and/or traveling exhibits
- Art galleries featuring & selling Native American artists' works
- Retail shop(s) for quality Native arts & crafts, books, audio recordings, DVDs, toys, jewelry, clothing, snacks, souvenirs, et cetera;
- Elegant dine-in Native American restaurant offering delicious, unique and exotic dishes;
- Café/deli featuring quick eat-in or to-go standard fare as well as popular Native American "fast food" like fry bread & Indian tacos
- Educational classrooms for craft workshops, story-telling, language lessons, etc.;
- An auditorium for lectures, readings, multi-media presentations, films, theatrical & dance exhibitions
- Library including rare book/documents archive and an extensive photographic archive;
- Offices for staff;
- Storage vault;
- Possibly a botanic garden on the grounds featuring plants native to this region and sculptures.
- Increased tourist dollars
- Jobs

About the Collection:

Ninety percent of the collection that belonged to MONAC is still in Spokane! The collection transferred to the Northwest Museum of Art & Culture (MAC)—formerly the Cheney Cowles Museum—when MONAC closed in November 1991. The collection totals over 12,000 archeological and historical artifacts and contemporary artworks from native cultures from the entire United States, Canada, Mexico, Central and South America, as well as a large collection of Western art and extensive photographic archive. The holdings of the former MONAC rivaled collections of the George Gustav Heye Center in New York City (Smithsonian), The American Museum of Natural History in New York City, The Smithsonian Institution National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C., Heard Museum Phoenix, Burke Museum in Seattle and collections in major museums in London, Berlin and Paris.

The vast collection includes many wonderful and rare examples from all major cultural areas including Eastern Woodlands, the Southeast, Great Plains, Southwest, California, Great Basin, Northwest Coast, Subarctic & Arctic, Central & South America (including the ancient Maya, Inca & Aztec civilizations), and of course the Plateau. The Plateau collection (art & artifacts from the interior northwest cultural area which includes the Spokane, Kalispell, Kootenai, Coeur d'Alene, Colville, Nez Perce, Shoshone-Bannock, Cayuse, Yakima, Flathead, Umatilla, Palouse, etc.) is unrivaled. Scholars from the Smithsonian Institution have travelled to MONAC to conduct research. A cultural museum of this caliber in the heart of Downtown could only strengthen Spokane's position as the cosmopolitan center of the Inland Northwest. It would be a destination for tourists, scholars, artists, authors, historians, Native peoples and schoolchildren and the general public alike.

Art:

The museum could offer not only galleries to display contemporary artists' works for show and sale, but also rotating/travelling exhibits of special collections. These shows will offer inspiration, education and appreciation of Native arts and artists.

In addition to exhibition of Native arts and crafts, and in conjunction with other educational programs offered by the museum, might be lectures and multimedia presentations about Native visual art and artists as well as art and craft classes and workshops for adults and children.

Shopping:

The new museum should include a museum shop that sells books, CDs, DVDs, toys, postcards, magnets and other souvenirs, clothing, snacks, and provide a retail outlet for *quality* authentic Native American arts and crafts from all cultural areas such as jewelry, beadwork, quillwork, pottery, textiles, kachinas, Northwest Coast carvings, et cetera.

The museum could include a special gallery to showcase and offer for sale the works of contemporary Native artists on special exhibition and include original drawings, paintings, limited edition prints, mixed media works and sculpture.

Dining:

Located in the heart of the City and situated on a spectacular view of the river and falls, I envision a center that offers much more than outstanding museum exhibits. Picture a wonderful dining experience unique in Spokane: an elegant restaurant featuring authentic Native American cuisine! The menu might offer entrees such as braised venison, elk steaks, roasted buffalo, roasted duck, rabbit stew, turkey, pheasant, pozole, roasted javelina, gourmet burritos and chili dishes, cedar plank fired-roasted salmon, stewed clams and other shellfish, lobster, crab, and many other seafood dishes. Side dishes made with ingredients like wild rice, corn, beans, squash, pumpkin, fern, nuts, mushrooms, potatoes, tomatoes, and more. Native breads like southwest soda and horno breads, piki, corn tortillas, Saginaw bread dripping with maple syrup, cornbread glazed with honey, et cetera. Perhaps even local samplings of camas, biscuit root, bitterroot or black moss food. Desserts of strawberry, huckleberries, melon, apple pie, peach pie, pecan pie, pumpkin pie, cranberries, juneberries, native plum, persimmons, or *squasm'* (Spokane "Indian ice cream") et cetera. Other Native American museums and cultural centers successfully offer unique dining experiences for their patrons that are of as much interest to patrons as their galleries and destinations on their own.

The increased American appetite for leaner alternatives to beef have given rise to more game farms that make the procurement of farm-raised and inspected game meats like deer, elk and buffalo more readily available than in the past. Several of these farms are local and thereby providing these ranches with another market would benefit the regional economy. The purchase of other food products such as wild rice would directly support Native American industries.

The Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque offers delicious dishes inspired by the Pueblo cultures of the area. The National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C. offers similar fare in a cafeteria style setting and it is absolutely delicious, fun and memorable. Offering a similar menu in a more elegant restaurant setting with spectacular window views of the falls would certainly be a draw to anyone coming Downtown. This restaurant should hold hours of operation independent of the museum so that people might enjoy a unique dining experience before or after taking in a show at a Downtown venue, during a stay at any of the hotels, after shopping or as a break during attendance of a business convention. Tourists can experience something here in Spokane that they will tell all their family and friends about. The restaurant would offer a new and exciting alternative for local citizens and compliment Downtown Spokane's already impressive list of great places to dine.

For museum visitors desiring simpler, faster and less expensive items, a smaller cafe could offer quick lunches or snacks. It might offer items such as fry bread, Indian tacos, buffalo burgers, burritos, fruit cups, popcorn, sautéed vegetables, baked beans, et cetera and drinks.

Education:

With its vast collections, library holdings and photographic archive, the museum would offer an unparalleled resource for students, scholars, researchers, historians, authors, schoolchildren and the general public alike. There are very few people who grew up in the Spokane area during the 70s and 80s who cannot remember class field trips to the Museum of Native American Cultures. Some of the educational handouts developed by MONAC are *still* being used by local school districts for their grade school social studies units on Native American cultures. The Museum in a Trunk program provided scripted lessons, materials and artifacts on a check-out basis to local schools for classroom use. The Junior Users Museum Program (JUMP) offered various arts & craft classes, workshops and story-telling to grade school students during school breaks and summer vacation. The museum's puppet shows travelled to many area schools for entertaining and educational school assemblies and featured Native American tales acted out by lively characters like Speelya the Coyote, Raven, Spiderwoman, and the Huckleberry Sisters.

Lectures, films, multimedia presentations and readings by tribal members, scholars, linguists, artists, historians, curators, authors and more could offer a rich variety of learning opportunities to citizens of all ages. For Native Americans the collections offer an opportunity to reconnect to and learn about their heritage and history, and allow them to share their own knowledge with the nonnative population. This cross-cultural exchange enlightens all and enriches the community's quality of life here in Spokane.

Having such a resource in the heart of the City might help realize the vision of a "U District" in Downtown Spokane. Washington State University has an outstanding graduate and undergraduate program in cultural anthropology within which students may emphasize Native American cultures, particularly those of the Plateau cultural area. Currently all classes for the anthropology program are only offered in Pullman. If this resource was available here in Spokane, perhaps the program would one day expand to include classes offered at the WSU branch campus already in Spokane. Eastern Washington University also offers courses in Native Studies and also has a branch campus in downtown Spokane. With such a resource available, perhaps more courses of study might bloom at Gonzaga University, Whitworth University and The Community Colleges of Spokane.

In addition to the benefit for local colleges and universities, the collection would offer opportunities for scholarly research outside of academia. The world-class collections of the former MONAC often drew researchers from across the nation and around the world, including researchers from the Smithsonian Institution.

Within the last decade there has been a great resurgence of effort by local tribes to preserve their native languages. Most tribes have added language classes/lessons to their school curriculums, community center class offerings and websites. They have worked tirelessly with the few remaining fluent speakers to preserve the languages before they are lost. The museum could offer another location where classes could be taught that might be more accessible to tribal members residing within Spokane as well as to interested members of the general public, thereby aiding with language preservation. Language classes are offered at Eastern Washington University as part of its Native Studies Program and have been offered at the Cheney Cowles Museum in the past. I took several "semesters" at the museum and classes were always well-attended by enthusiastic students, Native and non-Native alike.

Tourism:

This new Museum of Native American Cultures would be a wonderful addition to all the exciting things Downtown currently offers its visitors and citizens. By its own right, it would become a destination point, attracting visitors from around the state, the country and the world. The former MONAC routinely had large tourist groups come through and enjoy its exhibits. It was not uncommon to find the lobby donation box stuffed with rubles, lira, pound notes, marks, pesos, Canadian dollars, et cetera.

The dining possibilities as a tourist attraction have already been described, but special events and exhibitions put on by--or in association with--the museum, properly advertised and marketed, could draw hundreds or thousands of visitors to Downtown. Possible ideas include a juried Native arts fair (similar to the annual Santa Fe Indian Market), music, dance and theatre exhibitions, reenactment/living history fairs and more.

Jobs:

Remodeling the building to suit the needs of a museum would require planners, engineers, architects and specialists as well as a construction force to make it a reality.

A museum would require qualified staff to oversee its daily operations, programs, marketing and collections. It would at least need a director, curator/conservator, curator of education, director of marketing, public relations & fundraising, grounds & maintenance director, director of housekeeping, chef and skilled cooks and restaurant staff, retail shop manager. Many other positions such as retail shop cashiers, docents, workshop leaders/teachers, general grounds keeping & maintenance, gardeners, deli help, archivists could offer new volunteer opportunities for Spokane's citizens.

What happened to MONAC and why did it close?

MONAC was also situated on the river near downtown, but everything about Spokane was different then. Though its building (the windowless half-tipi on the north side of the riverbank) is somewhat of a Spokane landmark—it was situated in an undeveloped, once industrial area of Spokane outside the west edge of Gonzaga University's campus. It was not, quite frankly, in the nicest of neighborhoods. Directly across the river from MONAC (south) there was only the new Centennial Trail which then cut through scrub fields, marmot colonies, and homeless camps. To the west was Ruby Street (then a small rough side road) and industrial lots and buildings. To the north were mostly vacant warehouses and industrial businesses. And to the east lay a large scrubby weed lot (now site of Gonzaga's Jundt Art Center). The museum was out-of-the-way and virtually invisible. It struggled financially for many years, yet MONAC managed to turn a profit by the time of its closure in November of 1991, in the midst of what was--until now--one of the deepest economic recessions since the Great Depression. Much of its success was likely due to improved fundraising, advertising & marketing, educational programs and corporate sponsorship and patron support. Perhaps, had it been allowed a few more years, MONAC would have flourished as the City blossomed around it.

At the time of the proposed "merger" of MONAC's collection with that of the Cheney Cowles Museum, it seemed that the original plans for the new Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture promised a much bigger facility with an emphasis on exhibiting the combined collections of MONAC's and Cheney Cowles' Native American artifacts as well as galleries to house and exhibit artifacts pertaining to the regional history and development of the Inland Northwest and the City of Spokane. Over the course of designing the new facility, plans changed and were scaled back. The MAC is a marvelous museum, but there is not enough physical space to exhibit most of its Native American holdings. Perhaps the YMCA building can provide that space.

Procurement of the collection:

The City need not take ownership of the collection, nor the MAC relinquish it. Perhaps it would be in the interest of all to cooperate in the generation of the new museum that basically results in a joint venture between the Eastern Washington State Historical Society (MAC), the City and the citizens of Spokane through the Parks & Recreation Department and area tribe-owned casino resorts.

Possible sources for funding:

I have no capital to back this proposal nor do I have any idea of what it might cost. But if there is enough interest, perhaps a skilled fundraising campaign might generate the necessary funds. The local tribal casino resorts did not exist when MONAC was in operation. Had they been, they likely would have been strong financial supporters as corporate sponsors of the museum and its mission. Perhaps these local businesses as well as other organizations would be interested in this venture. I know taxes are never popular, but if there was substantial interest by the public, we (I pay property taxes within the City too) might vote to tax ourselves for this as a municipal project just as citizens did to support Expo '74.

A confession:

This "proposal" is very incomplete. It is, quite honestly, offered by someone wholly unqualified. I have absolutely no experience or knowledge of urban development, museum construction/artifact conservation, city planning, city and building codes, engineering, architecture, finance, economic development, or politics. I am far from the developer from whom the City seeks economically viable proposals. After hearing about the vacant YMCA building and the City's call for proposals, I decided to venture the suggestion. In order to even entertain the idea of a new Museum of Native American Cultures there are at least three basic prerequisites: (1) a collection to exhibit, (2) a location to house it, and (3) capital. Spokane has the first two. It was confirmed that most of this amazing collection of Native American art and artifacts was indeed still in Spokane and most was still unprocessed and in storage. It serves no one hidden away in a vault. I have no idea how such a project might proceed or be financed. Obviously, many specialists would be required to determine if reconditioning the YMCA building to suit this use would even be possible, but the site on the river seems perfect. These are glaring holes, I realize. I only hope that if those who *can* make it happen also deem it worthy of enough consideration to pursue ways to bring resources together to make it a reality for the citizens of Spokane. I believe the people of this city can accomplish great things that simply begin as one person's crazy dream (like transforming an ugly rail yard in a small city into a World's Fair).

Who I am:

Currently I am a stay-at-home mother living in Mead. I now live in the county, but also own property in the city and pay city taxes. I love Spokane and have enjoyed watching it continue to develop into the gem of the Inland Northwest while maintaining its friendly small town appeal. I am a graduate of Gonzaga University. I was employed as the assistant to the curator of education at MONAC from 1989 until it closed in 1991. All I have to offer is the idea. Perhaps the "rediscovery" of the collection will spark enough interest and enthusiasm among the elected officials in City Hall--and subsequently the citizens of Spokane and local businesses and investors--that an incomplete proposal, an idea, a dream might evolve into a reality and give everyone even more reason to come to Spokane and go Downtown.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Childress