



Spirited competition for Cowboy Hall of Fame

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Ten Montana communities have tossed their hats in the ring to be the home of a proposed state-of-the-art campus that will showcase Montana's cowboy past and Western heritage.

Proposed sites for the Montana Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center vary widely. Businessman Robert Howell proposed blending the hall with the Montana Event Center, a rodeo facility he is developing near Billings.

Meanwhile, Terry, an Eastern Montana town that was home to pioneer photographer Evelyn Cameron and the headquarters for the fabled XIT Ranch, bid for the center with help from the Terry-based Eastern Plains Economic Development Corp.

Another proposal came from Miles City, the town that draws 10,000 people every May for its Bucking Horse Sale, and another came from Big Sky, the ski resort community south of Bozeman.

The board of directors for the MCHF and WHC, a Wolf Point-based nonprofit organization, oversees the project, an estimated \$24 million endeavor. Other responses to the board's request for proposal came from:

Madison County Economic Development Corp.

Missouri Valley Development Corp., for Wolf Point.

Musselshell County Commission, for Roundup.

Park County Extension Service, for Livingston.

PhillCo Economic Growth Council, for Malta.

Sweet Grass County Commission, for Big Timber.

Aaron Lyles, MCHF and WHC finance director who heads the organization's fundraising effort, said the siting process stirred widespread interest around Montana.

"We probably had 200 (community representatives) that called in and said, What's the process? Is it true that you're considering opening it up?" he said, adding that many entities chose not to respond to the complex RFP but offered support.

The 2003 Legislature authorized the facility and designated Wolf Point as the location. But fundraising and organizational development stalled, so the 2011 Legislature revised the law to allow statewide competition.

The 2007 Legislature appropriated \$500,000 for the project, of which about \$75,000 has been spent on a master plan and site development. Private donations pay salaries of the three-person staff and will pay for the center's construction and operation.

The Hall of Fame board is expected to choose site finalists soon and pick the site by late November.

John Laney, executive director of the Miles City Chamber of Commerce, said his community could create a "trifecta" of museums with the addition of the Hall of Fame to two existing showplaces.

"The strongest thing we bring to the table is the ability to put it on the ground for a reasonably affordable way based on the fact that we have the Range Riders Museum, which is available, and the Custer County Art and Heritage Center, which is available," he said.

"A lot of the cowboy way of life exists across the street from where we're hoping to locate the Hall of Fame," Laney said.

Tracy Mosley, Montana State University/Park County extension agent, facilitated the working group that prepared Livingston's proposal.

She said Livingston's advantages as a site start with its strategic location.

"One very obvious driver is that our county is home to the only year-round entrance for vehicle traffic into Yellowstone National Park," she said, noting constant visitor traffic in both summer and winter months. Mosely also mentioned the history associated with the neighboring Story Ranch, the town's location along the Bozeman Trail and local amenities such as world-class fly fishing streams, winter sports activities, hunting and hiking.

Howell announced plans for the Montana Event Center in July 2010. The facility, to be built off the Pryor Creek Road/I-90 interchange southeast of Billings, will have a large restaurant, 75 RV parking spaces and an arena for youth rodeo and equine events.

"What the Montana Event Center is going to offer versus other places is that it allows us to focus on the cowboys of the future," Howell said.

"I think it's going to be an awesome fit if we can bring the cowboys of the past together with the cowboys of the future."

Duane Kurokawa, who heads the Missouri Valley Development Corp., said Wolf Point's bid centers on its history and local Native American culture because it's on the Fort Peck Reservation.

"Our pitch is to honor the cowboy way of life, American Indians and western heritage," he said. "We are in the Cowboy West (depicted in "Lonesome Dove"). All the trails that came north came to this part of the country, the eastern part of the state, Miles City and on up."