

Civil rights museum team unveils ideas at town hall

Public talks about where it should be

By Ernie Suggs

Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin is cautious about specifying a date on when ground will be broken for a proposed center for civil and human rights. But she is certainly putting it on the fast track.

"There have been questions as to whether we are committed. People say it is too much money. Too complex," Franklin told about 200 people Thursday at a town hall/Q&A session about the museum. "But I will suggest that people said the same thing when we said we would raise \$3 billion for sewers. Those of you who know me can be assured that we are going to work diligently to realize this dream of building a center for civil rights and human rights. It is past time."

Franklin, along with members of her working team of community leaders, presented the audience with a list of recommendations for the proposed museum, which they say will be a "living museum" that will not only trace civil rights in Georgia and America, but also human rights abroad.

"Atlanta and Georgia and what we have struggled with here, has influenced struggles around the world," said team member Doug Shipman. "It should be a living museum. Not a place where people leave and were not changed."

Franklin said the recommendations that were delivered Thursday closes out one phase of the museum's planning, and ushers in a period of more refinement.

With that, close to 40 members of the community were given an opportunity to throw out ideas — that ranged from including the struggle of gays to partnering with museums around the world to rotate exhibits.

But most of the discussion involved location. Coca-Cola has already offered a site near Centennial Park, which would put the museum in a complex with the new World of Coke and the Georgia Aquarium. But there has been growing sentiment from people within the civil rights community — including committee member Evelyn Lowery, the museum's visionary — who want it on Auburn Avenue.

But the committee's recommendation — although not final — was to place it at Centennial Park.

"I believe it is a superior site," Franklin said.

Paul Breslin, managing partner of Panther Hospitality, said the Coca-Cola site makes the most sense financially and logistically.

"If you have that kind of exposure, more people will be willing to go to it," he said. "And if you have a free location, logic will tell you to take a look at it."

Breslin, who has been in the Atlanta hotel business for more than 20 years, said that in talking to tourist and conventioners, there is a perception that Auburn Avenue is not within walking distance of most of the hotel rooms downtown or the Georgia World Congress Center, where many conventions are held.

"It is about proximity," Breslin said. "The reason why [the aquarium and the World of Coke] are down there, is because of the Congress Center. If you are going to build this museum, location is very important."

Franklin said that Central Atlanta Progress, led by A.J. Robinson, will continue to work on the museum's predevelopment phase. She said the museum, which will cost upwards of \$100 million, will be a public/private venture.

"This is not something that government can do by itself. This will not happen because Shirley Franklin wants it to happen. It will happen because we put time, energy and resources into it," said Franklin, in a plea to the community for support. "It will be terrible to have a gorgeous building with nothing inside."

Ground is expected to be broken in 2008.