

Tubman Museum a 'success' in first year in new building

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By Stanley Dunlap

Highlights: Tubman reaches one-year anniversary in new building, Attendance doubles in first 10 months, Budget reaches \$900,000 for first fiscal year



After more than a decade of construction stops and starts, the expanded Tubman Museum in Macon finally opened its doors last May. The museum's debut was met with a mix of elation that the new museum was finally a reality and skepticism that it would be able to stay afloat.

But now, a year after the museum dedicated to African-American art, history and culture moved from its cramped quarters on Walnut Street to its spacious 49,000-square-foot home on Cherry Street, it's proving its critics wrong.

The Tubman's executive director, Andy Ambrose, is heralding the new museum's first year as a success: Attendance has doubled, memberships are on the rise, and revenue — including rental income — has dramatically increased.

The operating budget for fiscal 2016 was \$900,000 and after a busy April that included the Pan African Festival being held near the museum, the Tubman is expected to meet its revenue goal by the end of June, Ambrose said.

Consider this: The museum brought in a little more than \$600,000 during the nine-month span from July 2015 through March. That exceeds by \$150,000 the revenue at the former location during the entire previous fiscal year.

"We made the move from the old museum to the new one within a month and a half, which is a tight time frame," Ambrose said. "We'd done a lot of research to predict what our new revenue opportunities would be, (what) our new expenses would be."

Ambrose said there's always a "little trepidation" when a museum undergoes a major change like moving into a much larger space. Utilities at the former 8,500-square-foot Walnut Street location cost about \$17,000 in fiscal 2014, the last full year that location was open. Utilities are expected to run about \$160,000 for the first year in the new building.

"You know there will be some bigger expenses, particularly utilities. But what we've seen is an embracing of the museum," Ambrose said. "We've seen a lot of increasing local and regional interest in the museum."

Macon-Bibb County Mayor Robert Reichert said the Tubman fits well into the "vastly improved" appearance of Cherry Street. He said he expects attendance to continue to grow as the museum gains more visibility, including through the recently announced addition of

Harriet Tubman to the \$20 bill.

“(The Tubman’s) better serving its intended purpose,” Reichert said.

Getting into the \$18 million building took years of work, as plans faced several delays through the years. The building originally was estimated to cost \$15.5 million. However, construction was halted in 2005 because of a funding shortage. In 2011, an extra \$2.5 million for construction was included in the special purpose local option sales tax that was approved by voters.

Before moving into the Cherry Street location, the museum was drawing between 13,000 and 15,000 visitors a year, but the new Tubman has attracted more than twice as many people over the just the first 10 months. (The Tubman only provided figures through March 2016.) Also, the number of members of the Tubman Museum has more than tripled to about 800 people, putting the initial goal of 1,000 members within reach, Ambrose said.

“Our two largest categories of (members) are seniors and families,” he said. “We look forward to providing an expanded spectrum of children and family programs.”

Among the biggest differences in revenue has been through rentals, which are expected to bring in \$65,000 in the new Tubman’s first year. Several years ago, the museum brought in about \$2,000 annually in rentals, Ambrose said.

The current building’s expansive rotunda can accommodate a dinner for 250 people, while the museum also can hold large events such as wedding receptions. The goal is to host more events and programs in upcoming years, Ambrose said.

“With this facility, with the catering support, we’re able to do small to very large events so that people are coming to enjoy the museum in a lot of different ways beyond strict admissions,” Ambrose said.

The museum also was able to raise \$100,000 for operation costs and programs through its All That Jazz concert in January at the City Auditorium. That performance was sold out. The International Taste of Soul, a fundraiser for the museum and Pan African Festival of Georgia, drew about 500 people to the Tubman in August.

Beyond admission and rentals, the Tubman also receives financial support from donors and other organizations. Macon-Bibb County contributed \$225,625 in fiscal 2016. The three years before that, the local government provided between \$237,500 to \$250,000 in annual assistance, according to city-county officials.

The museum has played a role in drawing people downtown, said Valerie Bradley, director of communications for the Macon-Bibb County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

“The Tubman has always been a great resource, but by them being in a larger facility and having new programs and events ... it’s been able to bring in additional visitors to Macon,” she said.

One of the Tubman’s latest rentals was a breakfast in celebration of the partnership between Macon-Bibb County and financial literacy and counseling initiative Operation HOPE, which is set up inside the Buck Melton Center.

The museum was chosen to host the breakfast for practical and symbolic reasons said James Bumpus, director of Small Business Affairs for Macon-Bibb.

“The museum is among the most valuable assets in our community,” Bumpus said. “As a center of history, culture and art, it provides a connection for our past, present and future. The design of the building lends its use to host any number of community events.”
Tubman’s past, present, future

The latest exhibit to open at the Tubman is a Haitian art collection. Nearly 30 years ago when the Walnut Street museum opened in 1985, the first exhibit was Haitian art on loan from an Atlanta gallery.

Tubman founder Richard Keil said he’s proud of the changes that have taken place while the mission has remained constant.

“The museum feels now the same way the day the museum opened (in 1985). There is such a big demand out there for what it represents,” he said. “The museum has to use all of its resources, which are limited, but they’re doing a wonderful job in providing a great service to the community.”

The museum offers a diverse array of exhibits and programs, such as photography by award-winning Jim Alexander of Atlanta and on May 19, a program highlighting the musical career of Prince, who died April 21.

The Tubman remains focused on continuing to develop partnerships throughout the community. Museum officials are exploring the idea of creating another gallery that would showcase art from students and staff from local colleges. And there are plans to use more of the existing space at the museum.

“We purposely designed (the museum) to where we have some spaces behind the scenes that we can bring online for need purposes,” Ambrose said. “With our focus on the visual and performing arts, in some ways what we’re becoming is a hybrid of a traditional museum and cultural arts center.”

Chi Ezekwueche, founder of the Pan African Festival of Georgia, has been involved with the museum for more than 30 years. She started out as a volunteer and eventually spent time as chairwoman of the Tubman board.

“The new building is a wonderful asset for Macon and Middle Georgia,” Ezekwueche said. “It gives another experience for people who have never been to this area.”

This year’s Pan African Festival drew thousands of people downtown to Cherry Street Plaza.

“During that festival a couple weeks ago, we had so many people coming into the museum to see the exhibits,” Ambrose said.

On Friday, Marqus Harris and Rebekah Royall made their first visit to the Tubman. The visit was by chance, as they stumbled upon the museum while in downtown Macon.

They said they enjoyed seeing some of the pieces from artists they recognize and others who were new to them.

“It’s nice,” Royall said of the Tubman. “It’s spacious, and there’s a lot of history. It’s amazing.”

As museum officials and members remark on some of the triumphs of a year inside a new building, they also remember the speed bumps that led to delays in finishing construction. Overall, the mood of Tubman officials is optimistic.

“Everything we’ve experienced and seen this year is very promising and points toward continued growth of our audience and impact in the community,” Ambrose said.

[Time-lapse shows National Museum of African American History under construction in D.C.](#)

The Smithsonian’s Museum of African American History and Culture is slated to open soon in Washington, D.C. EarthCam produced a video of the building’s construction with high-definition imagery and gigapixel panoramas from May 2012 to November 2015.

Courtesy of EarthCam www.earthcam.net