

No museum for Civic Center

By Mary Voelz Chandler

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Civic Center is off the table as a site for the Colorado History Museum, and the search for a new home may broaden.

The board of the Colorado Historical Society voted Thursday to drop the idea of relocating its museum there.

Issues of space, time and money - and an impending citizens initiative to keep museums out of the park - prompted the decision.

Board President Bart Berger said Thursday that the site was "no longer viable" under conditions of a counterproposal offered in December by Mayor John Hickenlooper and Denver City Councilwoman Jeanne Robb.

"It's with some disappointment that I report to this board that the Civic Center alternative, as it has been called, is no longer viable under the terms discussed and reviewed, and that the society and this board is now forced both to reject the mayor's 'counterproposal' and to continue seeking alternative relocation options," Berger said.

The historical society began looking for a new home in 2006 because the state's judicial system wants to expand on the site it shares with the society at 1300 Broadway.

The mayor's counterproposal included construction of a one- story glass building instead of a four-story structure the society wanted that would mirror the former Carnegie Library.

Most of the almost 40 board members were present, but only one - historian Tom Noel - voted not to reject the mayor's counterproposal.

Berger and historical society President Ed Nichols said after the meeting that the vote, in effect, ended the society's quest to build a new museum and offices in Civic Center.

After the meeting, the society e-mailed a letter to the mayor and Robb explaining the decision. The society's letter said in part:

"The size of the new structure in your counterproposal would be insufficient for the current and future needs of the Colorado Historical Society and Colorado History Museum when sharing space with the Department of Cultural Affairs.

"Extending the expected project schedule to allow for a citizen's initiative and possible election in November 2008 creates too many variables, both in time and cost, with an unknown outcome."

The Coalition to Save Civic Center has received approval from the city to gather signatures to put a measure on the November ballot to change language in the zoning ordinance to keep museums out of the park.

The mayor issued a statement in response to the historical society's decision.

"When the Colorado Historical Society approached us with an interest in relocating to Civic Center, we were open to the idea of a public process to discuss the opportunities and challenges surrounding such a move," Hickenlooper said.

"Out of that process, a number of community concerns were raised, which we tried to address in the city's counterproposal. If the Colorado Historical Society feels it cannot move forward under those more restrictive parameters, we certainly understand."

The search will continue, Berger said.

"We'll look at alternatives, and widen our scope and see what else is available."

After the vote, board member Frank Kugeler suggested that the committee studying sites for the historical society "expand the area of investigation" to include locations such as Union Station, the Gates redevelopment and Stapleton.

Bill Mosher, the project manager for a new building for the judicial system and the historical society, could not be reached for comment.

The decision was good news for Coalition to Save Civic Center member Brad Cameron, who said the group would "see how the dust settles."

"We were gearing up (to get signatures), but we'll see how this develops."