An Historic Day for Local History
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Executive Director

IT was truly an historic day. On December 16, 1991, Allegheny County Commissioner Chairman Tom Foerster and Pittsburgh Mayor Sophie Masloff joined representatives of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania to announce the purchase of the old Chautauqua Lake Ice Company building in Pittsburgh’s Strip District. The Historical Society will renovate the 160,000 square foot building and open it, in late 1994 or early 1995, the new Pittsburgh Regional History Center.

The acquisition of the 1890 ice warehouse was made possible by a $3.1 million public-private partnership in which county funds were made available to the Public Auditorium Authority to purchase the building, with the Society receiving a long-term renewable lease at $1 a year. The Society will be solely responsible for the renovation and conversion of the historic building into a major cultural facility. The new History Center is planned to house a museum of Western Pennsylvania regional history, with galleries, a research center, theater, and extensive reception and educational spaces.

The Public Auditorium Authority is a city/county agency which owns and operates numerous public spaces in Pittsburgh, such as the Civic Arena and the David L. Lawrence Convention Center, as well as holding the deed to the Benedum Center for the Performing Arts. The Benedum was developed and is operated by the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust in an arrangement which served as a model for the History Center.

Along with the announcement by Commissioner Foerster and Mayor Masloff of the governmental partnership was the announcement of the History Center Campaign to raise $22 million. Trustee Torrence M. Hunt, Jr., who chaired the first fundraising phase, announced that the Society had already raised $8 million for the campaign, including funds for acquiring the building and adding to the Society’s operating endowment, as well as for the renovation, exhibit planning, and fundraising costs of the project.

Public officials, historians, representatives of the cultural community, and various friends of the Society waxed enthusiastic at a reception following the press announcement, held downtown on the top floor of the Vista Hotel overlooking the new building.

Commissioner Foerster was particularly eloquent as he pointed out the virtues of public involvement in a project to preserve our significant regional history, stating that it “will be a great selling tool for companies who want to locate here and a great tool for tourism and a boost to our economy. The new center will be a strong attraction for county residents and visitors alike.”

Mayor Masloff looked to the future in pointing out that the History Center will be part of new development along Pittsburgh’s rivers and promised that the city “stands ready to give whatever support it can.”

The new History Center, to be located next to the David L. Lawrence Convention Center at the entrance to the historic Strip, has clear economic advantages that will benefit everyone in the area. It will add to the mix of tourist attractions, create

County Commissioner Tom Foerster at the announcement ceremonies of the new Pittsburgh Regional History Center, with Executive Director John Herbst looking on.
more than 30 new jobs at the Society and many dozens more in the building trades during the initial $10 million construction period, generate thousands of dollars in planning and vendor service fees, and pump more than $5 million into the local economy every year.

In addition to the obvious economic benefits, a major gap will be closed in the cultural facilities of Western Pennsylvania. The creation of a first-rate museum and library devoted to the care and presentation of regional history is long overdue.

The History Center will perpetuate an irreplaceable heritage through its collections, exhibits, programs, tours, publications, and classroom materials.

It will provide the public with an inviting cultural facility where area residents will "see themselves" in programs which will explore, among other themes and topics, our ethnic roots, families, work, industry, transportation, religion, and social life.

The need for a museum of Pittsburgh history has been identified for several decades. After five years of intensive and comprehensive planning and the support of many leaders in the community who wanted this to happen, we look forward to Opening Day later this decade. During the next three years, exciting progress will be made toward the goal of presenting to Western Pennsylvania the finest facility possible devoted to all aspects of our region's fascinating history.

To again quote Commissioner Foerster, the History Center represents an effort and investment "which will be repaid many, many times."