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OUR OPINION

Museum Offers Own Lesson

The Tampa Bay History Center's grand opening is scheduled today. And the history of how a 60,000-square-foot shimmering building on the waterfront with interactive exhibits came to be is itself worth the public's attention.

The project provides a number of useful lessons on how to achieve a public goal. Among them:

- **Don't rush.** It took more than 20 years for the center to become a reality.

It started in 1986 when Hillsborough County officials began to look for a way to warehouse its historical artifacts. The need to educate the public on the region's rich past was identified and evolved into the campaign for a museum.

But supporters never got ahead of themselves. They methodically built support before asking for public help.

- **Prepare for the worst.** When making projections for museum attendance, supporters used the most conservative figures possible.

And when asking the county for \$17 million to help fund museum construction, they also committed to raising the rest of the money needed to cover construction and exhibits as well as a robust private endowment to cover unexpected operating costs.

All involved remembered the Florida Aquarium experience. Backers said attendance would cover its construction debt service and operating costs. Those attendance projections turned

out to be inflated, and the city ended up bailing it out. The aquarium has become a popular and well-managed attraction, but it had a very rocky start.

History center enthusiasts wisely made certain they avoided the need for a similar county bailout. They're now close to raising their goal of \$32 million in private contributions, some \$15 million of which is in an endowment that should carry it through any tough economic times.

- **Reach out.** In planning the museum, the staff and volunteers reached out to all segments of the community, trying to ensure that their stories were accurately told.

As History Center Board Chairman George Howell points out, the museum will present voices past and present of "Seminole Indians, African Americans, ranchers, Hispanics, military officers, cigarmaker families and the others who played a role in shaping" the region.

And these voices will be found throughout the center. It is instructive that Museum President C.J. Roberts chose not to have a separate display on the black experience but rather sought to reflect that experience in the museum's different displays. No segregated history here.

- **Adopt and change.** The museum went through several directors before hiring Roberts, who had overseen the development of the D-day Museum in New Orleans and had the technical

and personal skills required of the task.

When the museum's original design was criticized for being energy inefficient, officials revisited the plans and ended up making it a green building.

- **Stick with it.** Former Hillsborough County Commissioner Jan Platt recalls Tom Touchton coming to her office on behalf of a museum soon after she started the push for the county to safeguard its historical artifacts.

Touchton, the head of an investment firm, is still laboring on behalf of the museum, raising funds, providing counsel and seeking community involvement.

Many others, including Howell, Platt and former Tribune history writer Leland Hawes, have been similarly dedicated. Center advocates were not deterred, even when they were subject to political attacks by showboating commissioners.

They calmly remained committed to task and sought to do what they could to turn doubters into believers. They succeeded to a remarkable degree.

So today the people of Hillsborough will be able to enjoy a museum that will present in a lively manner a history covering everything from Spanish explorers to civil rights marchers.

As with all new facilities, there may be some hiccups. But this is a group that has shown it will make whatever changes are needed to get things right.

The museum volunteers and staff have done our community proud.