

Rights museum on target to break ground this year

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ATLANTA (AP) - A proposed civil and human rights museum is still on track to break ground in downtown Atlanta by the end of the year, though fundraising efforts for the project have slowed in the down economy.

Executive director Doug Shipman said organizers have raised more than \$60 million, and need about \$30 million more to break ground. The museum will highlight Atlanta's and Georgia's contributions to human rights efforts around the world.

The total cost of the project is estimated at \$125 million, and the goal is to open the museum debt-free — a task that has become increasingly challenging as philanthropy has not been recession-proof, Shipman said.

"The stock market's precipitous decline has led people to evaluate how much they can commit," he said. "That makes us work harder. It certainly has made us want to continue to build a national profile so that we have a lot of different people we can pull from."

Atlanta has put up the bulk of the money for the project — \$40 million in bonds, to be repaid out of future tax revenues — and the museum is also being paid for with a combination of corporate, foundation and individual donations, as well as tax credits from the city. The return on its investment would be an estimated \$1.3 billion in economic impact, 2,700 jobs and 800,000 visitors in its first year.

Early on, the project also found corporate support from Atlanta-based companies like Turner Broadcasting and Coca-Cola — which donated the \$10 million, 2.5-acre parcel near Centennial Olympic Park as the museum site — but corporate donations began to dry up toward the end of last year, Shipman said.

The Home Depot Foundation partnered with museum organizers for a "Build the Dream" fundraiser from Jan. 9 to Feb. 28. The company matched 5 percent of the proceeds from a commemorative gift card, with the company's match topping out at \$1 million.

"We look forward to building a home for this piece of American history that will live right here in our own backyard," said Foundation spokeswoman Kelly Caffarelli.

Fundraising totals from the campaign were not immediately available on Monday. Caffarelli pointed out that the company has also donated \$1.6 million to help buy, display and maintain the papers of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., much of which will become the museum's expected centerpiece.

Organizers also expect to soon reveal how the museum will look. Earlier this month, five architectural firms presented their environmentally conscious concepts for the 90,000-square-foot project, which will feature exhibit, meeting, performance, dining and retail space.

A 13-member panel including architects, businessmen and local activists, could choose the winning design as soon as next month.