

<http://www.bizmonthly.com/new-programs-renovations-coming-to-merriweather/>

New Programs, Renovations Coming to Merriweather

By Mark R. Smith, Editor-in-Chief

June 3, 2014

Posted in: News

It's taken a long time. A very long time.

That's the nutshell observation that local music fans and other concerned citizens might make upon hearing that the long-discussed upgrades to Columbia's iconic Merriweather Post Pavilion are officially in the planning stages.

Yes. Really.

The upgrades to the venue that were initially discussed more than 10 years ago and were spelled out in the report from the Merriweather Post Pavilion Citizen Advisory Panel, dated March 2005 and revised this year, are now firmly entrenched in the long-term plan.

At the same time, Merriweather is eventually intended to serve the market as not only an amphitheater to present musical acts like [insert your favorite concert here] that have made it famous, but also as a cultural center that will operate under the auspices of the newly-created Downtown Columbia Arts & Culture Commission.

The commission is using the 2014 update of the study as a guide to make the pavilion "more profitable, more sound structurally and more sustainable," said Debbie Ellinghaus, commission chair, of the venue that Rolling Stone ranked No. 4 on its 2013 list of the "Best Amphitheaters in America."

"We want to bring it into the 21st century," she said.

The Deal

The parameters of the deal between Howard County, the Howard Hughes Corp. and the commission are as follows: Howard Hughes and the commission have entered into a memorandum of understanding that outlines a \$19 million schedule of improvements to Merriweather, to include a raised roof and new seating, restrooms, concessions, artist dressing rooms and a more versatile stage, during a five-year span.

The upgrades can't happen soon enough "and might begin as early as this offseason," said Brad Canfield, vice president of operations for Merriweather. "It all depends on how long it takes to get through Howard County's 16-step design process. If all goes well, we'll start building new restrooms and new concession stands this fall, as we prepare to raise the pavilion's roof and

modernize the stage facilities in fall 2015.”

The agreement calls for Howard Hughes to finance the first half of the renovations, with the second half to be financed through a loan made by the county to the commission.

Howard County Executive Ken Ulman, who threatened to change the local zoning law to compel Howard Hughes to turn over Merriweather to the commission earlier this year in an effort to expedite the improvements, identified funding for the project that was introduced via a budget amendment in late May to provide a \$10 million grant.

When the upgrades are complete, and when Howard Hughes and the commission work out permanent parking arrangements for the pavilion, ownership of Merriweather will be transferred by Howard Hughes to the commission.

Downtown’s Heart

Today, the concerned parties “are moving forward,” said Ellinghaus, noting that \$500,000 of that \$10 million grant is targeted for cultural programming. “We may not be able to start any new programming until next spring, but we are still looking into some options for this fall,” such as symphonies, musical theater, play festivals and film festivals, among other offerings.

“With the addition of \$9.5 million from Howard Hughes, we have \$19 million for renovations,” she said, “so the cost of the renovation is being split 50/50.”

Tom Coale, candidate for delegate in District 9B and publisher of the HoCoRising blog, was also upbeat about the news. “Merriweather is the heart of Downtown Columbia, and for the rest of downtown to thrive, the basic pavilion renovations need to happen,” he said, and also pointed to more upgrades after the first round is complete.

The news is also a good sign for the overall Downtown Columbia Plan to come to fruition, Coale said, because “this situation illustrates that Howard County and Howard Hughes can work together.”

The upgrade that Coale keyed in on was raising the roof, which will increase booking options for bands and programming. “That will also make the lawn seats more worthwhile,” he said, adding that the Inner Arbor Plan will add to Merriweather’s capacity, as the Butterfly will include some roof seating.

New Horizons

The Butterfly, the guest services pavilion in the Symphony Woods Inner Arbor Plan, will have 100 seats, with standing room for 299 on the roof and 400 more on the terrace “in what is planned as a 7,000-square-foot structure,” said Michael McCall, president and CEO of the Inner Arbor Trust.

While the Inner Arbor Plan was being organized, McCall and his staff worked with Merriweather “because we knew that took priority, and we had to know how the additions to that neighborhood [e.g., the pavilion and the Inner Arbor Plan] had to meld together.

“So we met in the Howard Hughes conference room over several months and worked very closely with I.M.P.,” he said. “We’re looking forward to working with both entities. We talk to Brad, Jean

[Parker, the pavilion's long-time general manager] and Seth [Hurwitz, of I.M.P., the venue's promoter] every week."

What's come of these discussions are plans for the pavilion and Symphony Woods that Jim Rouse hardly could have imagined.

"This will be a new kind of culture park, where the landscape is a setting for the arts, as well as civic uses, as dictated by the 2010 Columbia Downtown Plan," said McCall, noting that the Inner Arbor feature known the caterpillar, a 13-foot-high artistic and green boundary for the pavilion, also germinated from the meetings.

"We want the Caterpillar to be 'art of bounds' in defining the line between the venue and the woods," he said. "While we want the pavilion to be successful on its own, we also want the public to use it with Symphony Woods as a public park when there's no event. That's another win for Merriweather and the citizens of Howard County."

Everybody winning is the desired outcome for an updated Merriweather which, though "it's one of the oldest amphitheaters in the country, is still a place that music fans enjoy for its aesthetics," said Gary Bongiovanni, editor of Pollstar, an online music industry trade publication. "It's a good experience. That's key to keeping people coming back, unless you have an absolute must-see act — and most of the time, that isn't the case.

"Its only downfall is that the capacity doesn't always compare with that of some of the competing facilities," Bongiovanni said. "If an artist thinks he can sell more tickets than Merriweather can hold, that can be an issue. But most of the time, shows don't sell out, anyway."

Merriweather Saved

Ian Kennedy, now vice chair of the commission, is among the masses who were glad to hear the good news. It was he and another local resident, Justin Carlson, who started the grassroots effort, Save Merriweather, in 2003, "to bring attention to the fact that the Rouse Company [at the time] wanted to close it and build a much smaller enclosed theater, as well as develop the parking lot," said Kennedy.

But after Rouse agreed to keep it open basically as is, Save Merriweather's efforts became about the modernization that is finally happening.

"The new partnership to renovate Merriweather ensures our treasured pavilion can be successful and remain a cultural anchor in Downtown Columbia for decades to come," Kennedy said. "It is exciting to see what was envisioned in the downtown master plan beginning to take shape."

True, the pieces are finally falling into place. "Now, we can move forward and work together to keep Merriweather one of the greatest venues in the world," said I.M.P.'s Hurwitz. "The fact that the council voted unanimously on this matter means that they understand how special Merriweather is and that its grounds are not to be taken for granted.

"If you look at the acts that have played here, the challenge," he said, "will be to update the venue while retaining the charm that can only come from such a rich history in an idyllic setting.

"I'm really gratified," said Hurwitz, "that all of the interests are finally aligning and we can get started."

