

For Immediate Release

**PLAN FOR REVITALIZED SOUTHWEST MUSEUM TO ANCHOR CULTURAL-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
Plan Challenges Autry's Agenda of Neglect for the City's First Museum**

A *Los Angeles Times* editorial recently challenged the Autry Museum in Griffith Park to stop neglecting its partner, the Southwest Museum, and begin exploring ways to again make the Southwest a fully-functioning museum.

The [Times' Nov. 25 editorial](#) reinforced the Los Angeles City Council's own recognition of the civic and cultural importance of putting the Southwest Museum back to work fully showcasing its priceless collection of Native American and Meso-American art and artifacts.

- On June 21, 2011, Los Angeles City Council members, including now-mayor Eric Garcetti, publicly urged the Autry to revitalize the Southwest. At that time, Garcetti said it "breaks my heart" that the "Southwest Museum is not working right now – that is a problem....[W]e need to find the resources to make this [the Southwest] a place that works again."
- On June 1, 2012, the City Council unanimously urged the Autry to dialogue with Southwest Museum stakeholders "with the objective of arriving at agreed upon goals" that included renovating and expanding the Southwest.

To date, those appeals have been ignored by the Autry. Since 2003 the Autry has managed an uneasy partnership between its museum in Griffith Park and the Southwest Museum, the city's first museum, located in the Arroyo Seco, only minutes from downtown LA.

"The Autry's plan to abandon the Southwest Museum and let it die is totally out-of-step with the community and its top leaders," said Nicole Possert, spokesperson for the Friends of the Southwest Museum Coalition. The Coalition represents more than five dozen organizations that support the Southwest Museum.

"The Autry wants the Southwest's collection to be exclusively shown at its Griffith Park venue," said Possert. "But that's a selfish I-win-you-lose plan. That's not acceptable."

"It is time for the Autry to re-think its agenda for the city's first museum and join the Coalition's broad list of stakeholder organizations in a meaningful and respectful dialogue about how to accomplish the best expectations and hopes of the *Los Angeles Times* and of our elected leaders for a brighter future for the Southwest Museum," said Possert.

To jump-start such a civic dialogue, the Coalition today released a viable plan to preserve, modernize and expand the Southwest Museum, to make it a fully-functioning museum - and make it the anchor and engine for the cultural and economic development of the vibrant, multi-ethnic Arroyo Seco communities of Mt. Washington, Sycamore Terrace, Highland Park and Montecito Heights.

"Our plan is visionary and inclusive," said Possert. "The Coalition makes no apologies for being ambitious. The Southwest Museum's collection is big enough to be shown separately and independently at both the Autry and at the Southwest. That's what the Arroyo Seco communities deserve. What the City of Los Angeles deserves. What the city's first museum deserves. Ours is a win-win plan."

The Coalition's plan is the work of Rhode Island School of Design-trained architect and CalArts-trained fine arts professional Louisa Van Leer, an associate at Plum Architects.

"This exciting plan takes advantage of a wealth of cultural treasures that already exist in the Arroyo Seco and ties them together to create a living museum," said Van Leer. "This project is do-able. The pieces are all there. What has been missing has been the imagination to recognize and capitalize on the potential synergies available when all these cultural attractions are knitted together and properly promoted to Southern California residents and tourists."

The Living Museum concept of the Arroyo Seco Cultural and Economic Development District includes weaving together the following attractions:

- El Alisal, the original home of the founder of the Southwest Museum, Charles Lummis, which is now managed by the Historical Society of Southern California;
- Casa de Adobe, a re-creation of an 19th century ranch home inhabited by early Californians from Spain and Mexico;
- Heritage Square which consists of eight historically and architecturally significant homes saved from demolition and preserved by the Cultural Heritage Foundation;
- A string of a half-dozen homes along Sycamore Terrace built in the Arts and Crafts style of the 1920's, many listed as cultural-heritage monuments by the City of Los Angeles; and
- Recreational opportunities at Sycamore Grove Park, the Audubon Center and Ernest Debs Regional Park.

"In a very condensed space we have a tremendous opportunity to tell the story of Los Angeles, the Southwest region and its peoples," said Van Leer.

"What also makes this project particularly exciting is that this living museum is extraordinarily convenient to visitors because of the area's transportation amenities," Van Leer said. "There are Metro Gold Line stations right at the door-step of the Southwest Museum and of Heritage Square. This entire Cultural District would be easily accessible to tourists staying at hotels in downtown Los Angeles and Hollywood." The Southwest Museum is just 4.5 miles from downtown LA.

"Also, most of the destinations in the proposed Cultural District are within an easy walk or bike-ride of each other," Van Leer said. "It is a perfect setting for residents and visitors to enjoy our cultural treasures while participating in Los Angeles' active, outdoor lifestyle and the city's commitment to attractions that get residents out of their cars."

The Coalition's plan would also create the demand for visitor amenities in the Arroyo Seco neighborhoods, including restaurants, gift and arts and craft shops that tie into the cultural destinations. "We have already seen that nearby York Boulevard has become one of the city's hippest neighborhoods," said Van Leer. "We're confident this plan will put the Arroyo Seco on the map and drive economic development and community improvements."

"The Southwest Museum is the key to unlocking the Arroyo Seco's energy," said Van Leer. "If the Southwest is fully opened and allowed to function as a vital museum, the plan starts to move forward."

Van Leer's plan calls for sensitively restoring the existing 100-year-old museum building and for constructing additional exhibit space on the property's north side. The modern additions would not interfere with original museum's iconic and commanding presence on a hill overlooking the Arroyo Seco.

The Van Leer plan involves two phases. Phase 1 would rehabilitate the existing museum, add almost 4,000 square feet of new gallery space and add a new entry with ADA access to the entire facility. Phase 2 would add another 4,000 square feet of exhibit space, upgrade parking and add office space. Total cost: \$50.4 million. The plan also calls for an outdoor restaurant on the museum's south terrace that would offer dramatic views of the Arroyo Seco and downtown LA's skyline.

"Now we need the Autry to join the Coalition, city leaders and others who appreciate the value of preserving and sharing Los Angeles' cultural heritage to envision a bright future for the Southwest as a working museum," said Friends of the Southwest Museum Coalition leader Yvonne Sarceda.

"The Autry must be a partner to this plan," Sarceda said. "When Richard West, the Autry's new CEO, puts his mind to it and engages the Autry's board of directors, great things can happen. As the former head of the National Museum of the American Indian, Mr. West has proved to be a visionary and a prodigious fund-raiser. In addition, the City of Los Angeles and the State of California can, and should be, partners in supporting this enterprise."

The Southwest Museum has been at the center of controversy for several years.

In 2003 the Southwest merged with the Autry Museum.

As part of the merger, the Autry pledged to state and local officials, the Coalition and to the Southwest's governing board that it would seek to restore the Southwest Museum institution and building to its "original glory."

But the merger has been a huge disappointment. The Autry's not-so-secret agenda has been to let the Southwest go to seed and to expropriate the Southwest's priceless collection for exclusive display at its own facility in Griffith Park.

Under the Autry, the Southwest Museum has only sporadically been open to the public.

In mid-October of 2013, the Autry half-heartedly "re-opened" the Southwest with an exhibit of Pueblo pottery in one of the museum's gallery spaces.

The Coalition called this re-opening a farce because the pottery exhibit was only open for public viewing one day a week. In addition, the pottery exhibit is the third re-run of an exhibit displayed in 2003 and 2005. All other museums in the city – including the Autry's own facility in Griffith Park - are open six days a week and contain exhibits that are frequently rotated to provide visitors with the opportunity to see new parts of their collections.

"This was an opening in name only, and it powerfully revealed the Autry's default agenda to make the Southwest Museum disappear," said Possert. "We believe the public, funding agencies and our elected leaders can unite behind our plan and work with the Autry before it is too late and fully reopen the Southwest Museum and the Casa de Adobe (also acquired by the Autry in the 2003 merger)."

"The Autry's agenda is divisive and stunts the educational, economic and social growth of the Arroyo Seco's diverse communities," said Sarceda.

Since 2005, the Southwest has been virtually closed to the public. For a two-year period that closure was allegedly necessitated by relatively minor earthquake repair work on the building. But for the most part, the Autry justified closing the Southwest so it could box up the Southwest collection for shipment to a warehouse in Burbank.

All together, the \$9.5 million cost of packaging, transporting and storing the collection at the Burbank site was actually paid for by taxpayers – a fact that the Autry has largely tried to keep hidden from public disclosure.

The meager re-opening was called an “insult to taxpayers” by Coalition leaders at a protest and news conference on Nov. 12 where Coalition supporters stood outside the locked doors of the Southwest and demanded that the taxpaying public be allowed inside so they could enjoy the fruits of their multi-million dollar investment. The Autry refused to open the doors while its security staff stood watch.

Two weeks later, the *Los Angeles Times* in a Nov. 25 editorial publicly reprimanded the Autry for neglecting the Southwest Museum and urged that Autry explore ways to make the Southwest a fully-functioning museum and not follow through on its plans to transform the city’s first museum into a glorified community center.

“That editorial warned the Autry that it is out-of-step with the civic leaders of Los Angeles,” said Possert. “Now it is time for the Autry to embrace the community consensus, roll up its sleeves and join us in our plan to revitalize the Southwest Museum and Casa de Adobe and make these museums the centerpiece of a cultural and economic development corridor in the Arroyo Seco. Ours is a win-win agenda for all of Los Angeles.”