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Huge boost for museum

Crocker's top benefactors pitch in an extra \$10 million for coming expansion

By Bobby Caina Calvan - Bee Staff Writer

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An artist's rendition shows a new wing of the Crocker Art Museum that would be built next to the existing historic structure at Second and O streets downtown. Crocker Art Museum

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Two of the Crocker Art Museum's biggest boosters are reaching deeper into their pockets, each pledging an additional \$5 million for a major expansion that would triple the size of a facility struggling to accommodate its burgeoning collection and supersized ambitions.

The \$10 million infusion was announced at a fundraiser at Cal Expo on Saturday night, as the museum prepares to break ground next month on its new \$85 million wing and launch a broader appeal for cash among the general public.

To date, the museum's capital campaign has relied on a relatively small group of benefactors -- 164, by the museum's count -- who have contributed \$80 million of the \$100 million goal.

The biggest contributor has been the Joyce and Jim Teel Family Foundation -- a product of the Raley's grocery fortune -- which announced on Saturday that it would add \$5 million to its earlier pledge of \$8 million.

Mort and Marcy Friedman, who chair the museum's fundraising campaign, also announced they would donate another \$5 million to the effort, bringing their total contributions to \$10 million.

"The story here is the unbelievable generosity" of the Teels and Friedmans "for their significant gifts," said Lial Jones, the museum's executive director. "They have been absolutely essential to our progress every step of the way."

"We have worked really hard to get to this point," said Joyce Raley Teel, an honorary co-chair for the museum's capital campaign. "My family is proud and privileged to give this gift to the Crocker, because it leaves this legacy."

The donations represent the region's heftiest philanthropic effort to support a cultural endeavor that has fared poorly in the competition for government funding. Arts funding has dropped precipitously in California in recent years. Last year, the state ranked last in the nation in per-capita spending -- just 6 cents per resident -- for art programs, a statistic that concerns boosters of the arts.

Museums such as the Crocker have had to increasingly rely on wealthy patrons to fund programs and major capital projects.

"You can't have a great city without extraordinary institutions," added Marcy Friedman.

The city, county and state have kicked in \$18.5 million for the museum project -- although the sale of a nearby lot, near Capitol Mall and dubbed "Lot X," is expected to increase the city of Sacramento's contribution.

The Crocker is a joint partnership of the city and the Crocker Art Museum Association.

The Crocker's expansion, when completed in 2010, would expand the museum's footprint at Second and O streets, but also would undoubtedly extend its reach across the Valley -- and could help it to begin rivaling museums of greater size and stature.

"When this museum opens, it will be an icon for the city," said Jones, the museum's executive director.

"It is not just about an art museum. It's about civic pride."

That sentiment was shared by Mayor Heather Fargo, who calls the museum "a critical piece in our downtown revitalization."

The expansion allows the city's redevelopment engine to continue revving. "We've been really improving downtown Sacramento," Fargo said, "in making it a magnet for the people in the city and beyond."

Requests for bids for much of the construction work are to go out this week, and a groundbreaking ceremony is scheduled for July 26. The first phase involves shifting Second Street to accommodate the museum's expanded footprint.

The new wing would expand the Crocker to 170,000 square feet. The new museum would approach the size of San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art, which has 225,000 square feet for galleries, exhibits, cafes and shops. The Crocker will have the same amount of space for traveling exhibitions as the newly renovated de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park.

"For the first time, it will be a light, warm, inviting space," Jones said. "Museums are educational institutions. What we really want to do is engage visitors with works of art."

Foremost, the new wing will allow the museum to showcase a larger selection of its collection of 14,000 works of art, including its vast array of California art and ceramics -- and one of the country's most impressive collections of master drawings.

"Our collection is already world-class," said Jones. "What we don't have is the ability to show the works that give our museum its stature."

The museum's galleries have room for just 4 percent of the Crocker's collection, just a third of the industry standard.

While the expansion is expected to dramatically improve the art lover's experience -- with more to see, airier galleries, a roomier gift shop and a much-demanded cafe -- some of the most crucial improvements will be mostly out of view.

For the first time, the museum will be equipped with a freight elevator and a loading dock, standard amenities at major museums.

At times, oversized paintings have had to be removed from their frames, rolled up, then reframed for display. Some pieces have had to be slipped through windows -- because of narrow halls, low doorways and other architectural quirks that sometimes make maneuvering difficult at the museum.

Many of those quirks have been both blessing and curse. The old Victorians that originally comprised the museum lend a distinct sense of history and ornate color to the facility, but their halls have been constricting.

The Herold Wing, which features the architectural sensibilities of the 1960s, will be torn down.

The final edifice will be a marriage of the new and old. Much of the gleaming new facade will be stark white -- giving it a glow designed to harken that of the nearby Capitol -- but will be seamlessly anchored by the museum's existing Victorians, once the home and private art gallery of Judge Edwin B. Crocker, whose family was among California's "Big Four" railroad barons.

The museum's architects -- Gwathmey, Siegel & Associates -- designed the expansion of the Guggenheim in New York and the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle.

In the past 11 months, nearly 160,000 people visited the Crocker. The expansion is expected to help the museum draw as many as 300,000 visitors, perhaps more, annually once the new wing opens.

The museum also hopes to boost its membership from the current 9,400 to more than 12,500 by 2010.

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About the writer:

- The Bee's Bobby Caina Calvan can be reached at (916) 321-1067 or bcalvan@sacbee.com.



An artist's rendition shows a new wing of the Crocker Art Museum that would be built next to the existing historic structure at Second and O streets downtown. Crocker Art Museum



Joyce Raley Teel, center, and Marcy and Mort Friedman top the list of the Crocker Art Museum's boosters. It was announced their respective families will contribute another \$5 million each to the expansion drive. Sacramento Bee/Florence Low