

# Association Meets with West Central Community Development Group in Albuquerque to Discuss Proposed Route 66 Visitors Center



Rendering of Central Ave / Route 66 facing side of Route 66 Visitor Center.

that this may include revisiting the name of the facility, which up to now has been branded the West Central Route 66 Visitors Center.

The Association pointed out that, given New Mexico's and Albuquerque's Route 66 heritage, visitors would have high expectations upon entering a Route 66 Visitors Center and a proposed Route 66 Museum. The Association emphasized that an underwhelming presentation of our rich Route 66 heritage would invoke a strong negative response from visitors that would be communicated worldwide through the very active social networks that are connected to Route 66 culture and history.

On February 3rd, New Mexico Route 66 Association Officers, including President Melissa Lea Beasley, met with Luis Hernandez, Executive Director of the West Central Community Development Group (WCCDG) to conduct fact finding with regard to the status of the \$10 million project known as the West Central Route 66 Visitors Center. Construction will begin with groundbreaking scheduled for February 2021. The Visitors Center is a collaborative effort that includes Bernalillo County, the city of Albuquerque, WCCDG and the Southwest Alliance of Neighbors.

The Association communicated its awareness of strong headwinds that face the project, given negative press calling the project a "boondoggle" in a 2019 Albuquerque Journal editorial, and a follow-up Journal editorial in 2020 headlined "... Visitors Center Not Ready for Prime Time." This is in addition to a commissioned professional economic study that concluded the project was financially unsustainable.

Mr. Hernandez opened the meeting with a virtual animated walk-through tour of the exterior and interior spaces planned for the center, which will be located on a five-acre site at the apex of Nine-Mile Hill. The anchor building features 21,000 sq ft with an upper floor that includes a 4468 sq ft event space and a 1369 sq ft commercial kitchen. The ground floor provides several administrative offices, a proposed tap room of 1286 sq ft with an adjacent patio, a proposed 3250 sq ft museum space, and a 1243 sq ft exhibition space.



Rendering of event space. This area plus its kitchen and pre-function room will occupy the entire 2nd floor, totaling approximately 7,097 square feet.

Ms. Beasley reminded Mr. Hernandez of several key details regarding Route 66 and the project. "Their website ([www.wccdg.org](http://www.wccdg.org)) states, 'Albuquerque has the longest stretch of the historic Mother Road in the country, and when operational, the Visitor Center will have a national presence, and locally will further advance economic development on the West Central corridor.'"

It was well understood at the meeting that Mr. Hernandez has inherited an incredibly challenging job to realize a sustainable and creditable facility that will serve the west side community. The New Mexico Route 66 Association advised that job one is to capitalize on the February groundbreaking to issue a new RFI initiative that would include a broader outreach plan promoting the business potential available to prospective tenants, as well as creating an incentive package that could be attractive to potential tenants.

The meeting established that although the facility is anticipated to be completed in early 2022, the building currently has no confirmed tenants for operating the proposed museum space, tap room, and banquet/event hall. The WCCDG issued RFIs for the tap room and banquet hall that were due October 15. Hernandez informed the Association that there were no qualified responses to the Tap Room RFI and only one inquiry on the Banquet/Event Hall. No RFI was issued for the museum space.

Concluding the meeting, Ms. Beasley commented that "the project conveyed the look and feel of a community center the west side needs and could benefit from. However, it does not possess the proper layout and space needed for a Route 66 Visitor Center and/or Museum." Further complicating matters, she mentioned that press releases had been distributed announcing the building will be a Route 66 Visitor Center, but that there is neither plan nor money to finish out the building to make that happen.

A number of ideas are currently being proposed for the multi-use facility including a New Mexico Music Hall of Fame, a lowrider exhibit/museum, a Route 66 Museum, drive-in movie venue, a Route 66 sign graveyard, RV Park, and amphitheater.

"The Center is trying to appeal to two different demographics," Ms. Beasley continued, "the local community and Route 66 visitors. It has accomplished serving the local community and should focus on that aspect. Unfortunately, it is in no way designed to be a true Route 66 Visitor Center or museum, nor does it have the historical knowledge of Route 66 to accomplish that goal."

Mr. Hernandez acknowledged that the facility has not been optimally defined and he noted that a branding professional has been retained to further work with the WCCDG to develop a clearly articulated identity. Mr. Hernandez explained

The Association will convene a round table discussion among its Board of Directors to determine how it can best contribute to the success of the project.