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CONSTRUCTION UNDERWAY ON NATIONAL DISCOVERY CENTER IN LEWISTOWN

Plans Include New Ken Burns American Heritage Theater

American Prairie Reserve is pleased to announce that construction is underway on its National Discovery Center in Lewistown, which is slated for a public opening next summer.

The conservation organization purchased the historic Power Mercantile Building in downtown Lewistown in 2018 to serve as an educational hub for visitors seeking to learn about the global significance of Montana's great plains. Alison Fox, CEO of the Montana-based nonprofit organization, said building renovations began this summer after 18 months of extensive planning and fundraising.

"The National Discovery Center remains a top priority and our goal is to open its doors in the summer of 2021," said Alison Fox, CEO of American Prairie Reserve. "As long as we can continue to ensure a safe work environment during the global pandemic, then we are optimistic we can meet that date."

The Center's keystone component will be a dynamic gathering space, created to engage a variety of audiences and stakeholders with the prairie and the mission of American Prairie Reserve.

In addition, state-of-the-art exhibits will share the story of the American Prairie Reserve project, the prairie ecosystem, and the cultural and ecological history of the region.

The National Discovery Center will also feature the Ken Burns American Heritage Theater. Funding for the theater was provided by an anonymous donor and the space is intended to draw public interest by offering informational videos while also accommodating educational lectures, symposium, and other events.

Ken Burns, the award-winning documentary filmmaker said he is honored to be included in the vision for the National Discovery Center.

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“Montana’s great plains have rich historical and ecological significance and it’s an honor to facilitate our understanding of this shared American heritage through construction of this theater,” said Burns.

Ongoing renovations also include construction of an interactive children’s zone, staff offices for APR employees who live and work in Lewistown, and an information desk that will help visitors plan their trip to the Reserve.

Seth Hawkins, Kären and Jay Abbe Director of the National Discovery Center, said he is excited by all the progress being made this summer.

“It has been incredibly rewarding to watch the work unfold every day and see this vision gradually become a reality,” Hawkins said. “When our doors open this will be a great destination for people traveling through Lewistown and a new resource for the community,” he said.

Lewistown-based Snowy Mountain Development Corporation (SMDC) said completion of the National Discovery Center and the Ken Burns American Heritage Theater will help bring national recognition to Central Montana.

“Vibrant downtowns are critical for rebuilding rural America and when completed the National Discovery Center will help revitalize and reinvent our historic downtown,” said Kathie Bailey, executive director of SMDC.

Commercial construction and refurbishment of the historic Power Mercantile Building is being overseen by Lewistown-based Birdwell Builders.

“Most of the demolition is done,” said Bret Birdwell of Birdwell Builders. “It is really nice to be moving forward with construction and the project is going well.”

The company has more than 20 years of experience overseeing projects in Central Montana including the Central Montana Medical Center, Basin State Bank, and Lewistown Honda.

“This is an important project to complete because it will help educate and inspire the next generation about the importance of grassland ecosystems,” said Fox.

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About American Prairie Reserve

American Prairie Preserve's vision is to create a vast and collaboratively-managed prairie destination that serves as a fully functioning ecosystem for wildlife, and offers visitors permanent access to the landscape that shaped our nation's character. When complete, the Reserve will be larger than Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks combined, and will support wildlife species that historically called the Great Plains home. Already open to the public for recreation including camping and hunting, the Reserve offers visitors an opportunity to connect with nature on a truly grand scale. Learn more at americanprairie.org.