

Black museum project hinges on historic views

WASHINGTON (AP) - One dramatic historical moment is fueling arguments for and against a black history and culture museum on the National Mall: the 1963 March on Washington.

For one-time civil rights leader Rep. John Lewis, a museum telling the story of his people from slavery to the present would memorialize the moment when hundreds of thousands of protesters filled the open green space between the Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial.

To critics, cluttering that space with another building would detract from its original purpose of openness and a place for people to air their grievances en masse - no better dramatized than by the 1963 march.

"Civil rights really have made the Mall an embodiment of the Constitution by showing the constitutional guarantees of freedom were not extended to the black community," said Judy Feldman, president of the National Coalition to Save Our Mall.

"The fact we have a Mall where people can go and make their case means it's filling a function. That function is not by filling it with buildings, it's by filling it with people."

Lewis, D-Ga., agrees the Mall shouldn't be cluttered. But if anything deserves to be situated on some of Washington's most-coveted real estate, he says it's this project.

"The Mall represents the front door to the symbol of our democracy," said Lewis, who was beaten during the 1965 "Bloody Sunday" march over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala. "An African-American Museum shouldn't be up to the side or in the back. It should be as close to the other museums as possible."

Other Smithsonian museums currently open on the Mall are the Art and Industries Building, the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Gallery, National Air and Space Museum, National Museum of African Art, National Museum of American History and National Museum of Natural History.

Senators have already authorized construction of a black history museum and designated four possible sites on or directly next to the Mall. Among them is a perch on the Capitol's lawn.

It was recommended by a presidential commission but

has met the most vocal resistance. The House is still debating where it would prefer the museum.

Feldman says the legislation leaves out some good sites that aren't directly on the Mall but are within walking distance.

Sen. Sam Brownback, a Kansas Republican who has teamed with Lewis to get a prominent venue, says putting it away from the Mall's other museums would harken



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back to the "separate but equal" treatment of blacks during segregation.

"That would be enormously insulting to a number of people and quite harmful to the efforts to reconcile," Brownback said.

While both sides are determined, the debate has been far less contentious than the squabble over a World War II Memorial, which ended up in court and left Mall preservation groups cringing. That

memorial, featuring 56 17-foot pillars, two four-story arches and a sunken plaza with a pool, is being built on the green space between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument.

Robert Wright, chairman of the presidential commission, says there is no comparison between the impact of the World War II Memorial site and those being discussed for the black history museum.

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