

Monterey's Colton Hall looks to boost popularity

By

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MONTEREY >> About 12,000 visitors a year tread the gray wooden steps to the second-story Monterey assembly hall where California was born.

The state's first constitution — a document that, surprisingly for the time, granted property rights to women — was written in 1849 inside the white stone walls of historic Colton Hall in Monterey's civic center.

City officials would like to bring the history embodied by the Colton Hall Museum — open seven days a week from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. — to more people.

For the first time since 1949, when the 165-year-old assembly hall became a museum, after earlier stints as a school, town hall, courtroom and hospital — the city has a thick, new interpretive plan that lays out short-, medium-, and long-term plans to spread the word about Colton Hall.

"I call it the 'Independence Hall of the West,'" said city museums manager Dennis Copeland.

The hall was the largest public building west of the Rocky Mountains when California became a state.

The interpretive plan was funded by a \$20,000 grant from the Community Foundation for Monterey County and adopted by the city Museum and Cultural Arts Commission in January. In March, the commission set to work on the priorities for short-term recommendations.

At the top of the list is increasing access to the museum — which is served by a double stairway on the front of the building and a rear stairway — for visitors with disabilities.

"It is important we address that," Copeland said.

In recent weeks, two public events scheduled to be held in the museum — its annual March birthday celebration and a concert — were moved to the Colton Hall front lawn and to the Museum of Monterey's Stanton Forum.

The issue of disability access hasn't stemmed from complaints from the public, but from the city's overall effort to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, Copeland said.

Some ideas would be producing "virtual tours" for mobile electronic devices, online videos, moving some museum events to other venues and a lift to help people in wheelchairs to the museum.

"There are different devices," Copeland said. But the historic status of Colton Hall would prevent any structural work that would damage its "historic integrity," he said.

As it is, there are times when Copeland or a museum guide tell the many stories of Colton Hall to visitors in wheelchairs on a brick landing at the rear of the building. The first floor of Colton Hall houses city offices.

The first step would be to do an accessibility study on Colton Hall, which would come up with ADA recommendations. Copeland said a study request will go into the proposed 2014-15 city budget.

Other short-term ideas for Colton Hall include: redoing the gift shop, a digital media exhibit plan and more emphasis on materials and displays from the hall's school-house era.

Visitors enjoy the school-related exhibits. "Everybody went to school," Copeland said.

Jeff Lanzman, a guide affectionately known as "the museum guy," said the biggest surprise for many visitors is that the state's first constitution drafted in Colton Hall was in English and Spanish.

It was an easy decision for the delegates gathered in the old capital of Alta California. So natural that it was done by acclamation rather than by a roll-call vote of delegates, Lanzman said.

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