
Long-delayed Sarasota Museum of Art to open in December

By Jay Handelman

Arts Editor

Posted Mar 21, 2019 at 4:32 PM

Updated Mar 21, 2019 at 6:33 PM

New museum and Ringling College of School of Continuing Studies will operate in the historic Sarasota High School building

Art lovers and donors have been in a holding pattern for several years awaiting the opening of the long-delayed Sarasota Museum of Art.

A grand opening is now planned in December.

The \$27 million project has transformed the historic Sarasota High School building on U.S. 41 south of downtown Sarasota into the Ringling College Museum Complex, composed of a museum designed for temporary exhibitions, lectures and discussions and classes in Ringling College's School of Continuing Studies, which includes the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute.

Larry Thompson, president of Ringling College of Art and Design, said Thursday that construction is expected to be completed by May on the major renovations to the historic building on U.S. 41.

The museum started as a community-driven project before it merged with Ringling College more than a dozen years ago. After the completion of a \$22 million fundraising drive in 2014 and a gala celebration in the old high school, officials initially thought the museum would be ready to open by 2016.

Construction crews restored the outside of the old high school, and had to make far more extensive repairs to the damaged interior.

"The condition of the inside was very poor because of neglect over the years. There was nothing keeping the elements out of that building," Thompson said.

Then, the Sarasota County School Board, which leased the property to the museum, offered to add Building 42, a 20,000-square-foot facility, along with adjacent parking and land.

“That was a fascinating development,” Thompson said. “It would be disappointing because it would delay things, but on the other hand it would make it all so much better.”

The additional space led to a complete reimagining of the project.

Once completed, the museum will have about 15,000 square feet of exhibition space, plus a cafe or bistro, a retail store, an auditorium for educational programs and a sculpture garden.

“The museum will be much larger than we originally planned,” Thompson said.

There are also plans for a future children’s art play-space in a park-like setting. The museum will focus on traveling and temporary exhibitions that it creates.

Thompson said there was always a plan to include continuing education classes to help cover the costs of operating the museum.

“We couldn’t handle a contemporary art museum that would be the size of the entire high school. We had to find a different way of creating a revenue source for the building,” he said.

A merger with the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute “turned out to be a wonderful marriage because we didn’t have to recreate it from whole cloth.” Adult education classes will be based at the museum building, but also will be offered at other locations.

The college said staff for the museum and continuing studies operations will move into the building in August. Anne Marie Russell, executive director of the museum, said she plans to announce the initial exhibitions schedule that month, as well.

In September, registration will begin for SCS classes, which will run from September through November.

A black tie gala will be held in December to mark the debut of the museum, followed by its opening to the first 500 museum members and then to the general public.