

Selling NSP: 'A hell of a tourist draw'

Group pushes plan for museum, tourist attraction

BY GEOFF DORNAN

gdornan@nevadaappeal.com

A group of activists headed by Myron Carpenter is working on a plan that would turn the historic Nevada State Prison into a museum and tourist attraction.

The prison closed in January and was officially decommissioned in a ceremony May 18. One of the oldest prisons west of the Mississippi, NSP began operations as the Nevada Territorial Prison in 1862.

Carpenter said he and other supporters of the plan are working to get NSP listed on the national register of historic places. He said they also are working to form a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation to raise money for the plan.

He got involved because he said he was irritated by the attitude of legislators that nothing could be done with it.

"I lived here when they tore down the old (V&T) roundhouse, that irritated people to no end," he said. "I don't want to see them tear down that prison."

He said he taught history for 38 years and took numerous tours of students through NSP.

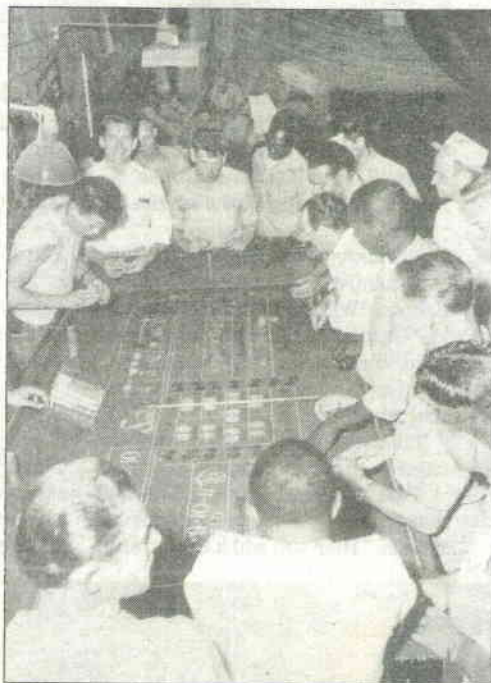
He said the idea has drawn tremendous response from the public.

Along with the V&T railroad and other historic amenities, he said the prison could become "a hell of a tourist draw, a gold mine for this city."

Peter Barton, administrator for the state division of museums and history, said NSP is "clearly a historically significant property."

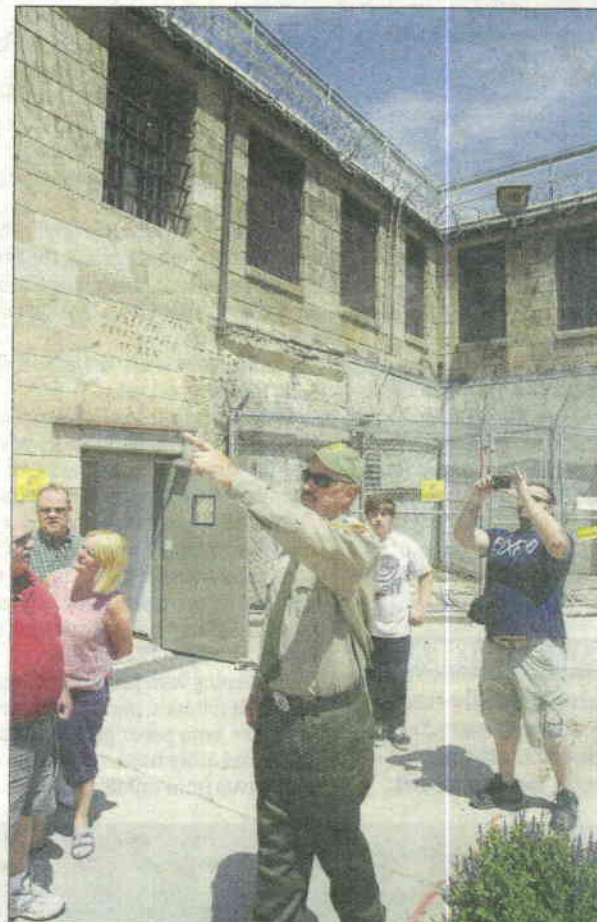
"It's got a storied history," he said. "It's got some unique history associated with it in terms of the timing of the gas chamber (first in the nation) and the fact a casino operated there for so long."

But Barton said there's a lot of work that must be done to achieve what



FILE PHOTO

LEFT: Between 1932 and 1967, inmates operated their own casino at the prison. RIGHT: Sgt. Mike Thalman talks about Nevada State Prison during a tour after the decommissioning ceremony in May.



SHANNON LITZ / NEVADA APP

Carpenter wants — including a study of the complex to "see what its needs are and what kind of public space could it be and what stories it will tell."

"It is a story that's sustainable (as a museum attraction)," he said.

Barton said the private non-profit group is important because with the drastic cutbacks Cultural Affairs has suffered, his division can't take on that task at this time.

Then, he said, there is the potential cost of turning NSP into a museum.

"The building itself is in pretty darned good shape," Barton said, adding that he doesn't see dramatic costs in opening up the ground floor — the lower level of the old prison.

Public Works Manager Gus Nuñez said his staff has prepared estimates of what it would have taken to upgrade NSP to continue operating as a prison. In 2009, that estimate was north of \$71 million, which he and lawmakers all agreed was too much to justify.

But Nuñez said that is a very different set of requirements than what would be necessary to operate it as a museum.

"We've never looked at it from that perspective," he said.

Some costs would be much less because fixing the prison wouldn't require new plumbing and electric service to every cell in the prison.

"You have to have (Americans with Disabilities Act) access to everything you open up to the general public," Nuñez said.

Nuñez said if the fire marshal decides that the prison needs to have sprinklers and fire alarms installed, the price of converting it to a museum could be greatly increased.

Most problematic, he said, would be access to the execution chamber. That, he said, would require installation of not only an elevator but an alternate evacuation route that could be used by the disabled if the elevator failed — a very expensive proposition.

Nuñez said the overall costs can't be calculated until supporters of the project present his staff with a formal plan so they know what they have to do.

Barton said the first step is to complete the nomination for national registration status. The Nevada Department of Transportation, he said, should have that nomination done by the end of the year.

Barton said that would open the door to attract private donors and grant money.

Carpenter said he and other supporters are working on the nonprofit status as well as contacting other states with prison museums for ideas on operations, exhibits and fundraising events. In addition, he said the movie industry is very interested in the prison.

"The possibilities are there," he said.