

SOME DOUBT, STORMY CASSILLY CAN SAVE, CITY MUSEUM

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Could the man who wants to save the City Museum from bankruptcy also cause its undoing?

St. Louis artist Bob Cassilly is poised to buy the museum he created five years ago. That's good news for the nonprofit board that owns the museum. It's broke and must sell. But observers wonder if Cassilly's stormy personality and curious business plan are bad news for the attraction and its 300,000 annual visitors.

Cassilly -- who is known for doing things his way, and often succeeding -- plans to run the City Museum as a commercial business rather than a nonprofit organization, an approach that baffles arts managers. Currently annual charitable gifts from foundations, corporations and other arts funders account for about \$1 million of the museum's \$2.6 million budget.

That money is likely to dry up. Many granting organizations are banned by law or their own guidelines from donating to for-profit businesses. In addition, donors would no longer earn tax deductions, a major incentive for giving. Museum expert Joanne Kohn questions how Cassilly will make ends meet with no help from businesses, individuals and arts agencies.

"No one is going to donate to the City Museum unless their donation is tax deductible. And if the City Museum is not going to supplement its income with donations, how is it going to survive?" asked Kohn, director of the arts management and leadership program at Webster University. "I don't know how he thinks he will bring in enough income."

Without nonprofit status, the City Museum will be liable for a variety of taxes. It will have to pay sales tax on all purchases from pencils to concrete as well as collect sales tax on all merchandise sold. It will have to pay federal income tax on all net revenues. On top of that, the museum will lose its exempt status for personal property tax and federal unemployment tax. Susan Greenberg, executive director of St. Louis Volunteer Lawyers & Accountants for the Arts, said the City Museum also will relinquish small tax perks such as lower rates on bulk mailing.

"It takes a lot more money to run a business, no question," Greenberg said.

How much more? Cassilly acknowledges he does not know. He has yet to devise a budget for the museum but is confident the institution will stay afloat.

"It (the budget) will be whatever we spend," Cassilly said. "I'm going to wing it."

Though Cassilly will still call the place a museum, he considers it more of a playground. He hopes children come here to crawl through tunnels, marvel at remnants of St. Louis architecture and learn from local artists. He has said he plans to eliminate more dainty exhibits such as recent shows on weddings and toasters. Cassilly also has been working on an expansion that will open later this spring. It will feature a climbing wall, circus performers and an "erector set for big boys." City Museum admission will remain \$7.50; there will be an additional fee for the expansion. He hopes the new attractions will lure more patrons.

"The naysayers are forgetting about the demand side," Cassilly said. "If you build a better mousetrap they will come."

Cassilly also plans to mine more money from special-event rentals and parking, which is now free, but won't be once Cassilly opens "Greedy Bob's Parking Lot." He also has eliminated the museum's advertising and the legal budget as well as its fund-raising and education staff.

Current board president Randy Lipton doubts those cuts will balance the books. He refers to an Association of Youth Museums survey that shows the City Museum's budget is in line with its major counterparts across the country.

"The operation of the City Museum is very, very efficient," Lipton said. "The education and development (programs) brought in far more than they cost."

Cassilly acknowledges the benefits of a nonprofit organization. However, he says the restrictions far outweigh the gains. Even, when the museum opened, he resisted the idea. He did not want a board of directors (a legal requirement of all nonprofits) setting the museum's agenda, nor did he want to spend time fund-raising. In the end, Cassilly reluctantly agreed to file as a nonprofit because he needed government tax credits to complete the project.

From that point on, Cassilly was at odds with the board and the museum's director, his wife Gail Cassilly. The couple recently divorced.

The conflict spilled into the museum's lease negotiations. Though Bob Cassilly no longer was engaged in the museum's daily operations, he still owned its building. Last April, a civil court appointed former mayor Vincent C. Schoemehl Jr. to mediate a deal between the board and Cassilly. Almost a year later, the two sides still could not agree on a long-term lease. With no deal and \$2.5 million in debt, board members said they had no choice but to dissolve. The board transferred responsibility for the museum's daily operations to Cassilly on Tuesday.

Cassilly has retained most of the employees, and the City Museum experience is largely the same. But how will Cassilly the artist fare as Cassilly the manager?

Though admirers applaud his playful sculptures, such as his work at the St. Louis Zoo, the Butterfly House and Turtle Park, critics say there is a flip side to Cassilly's spontaneity and blunt manner. They note that he is quick to protest grievances and has repelled potential allies and funders with his fiery temper. For instance, in October 2000, Cassilly spray-painted the famous Turtle Park sculptures he created because he objected to the epoxy used to weatherproof them.

Last week, he threatened to commandeer the City Museum in a stand against the board. The board successfully filed for a restraining order.

He also has been known to work without permits, such as the time he built sculptures along the World's Fair Wall near Forest Park Parkway without the approval of the neighborhood association that abuts the wall.

Cassilly agrees that he will act on his "righteous anger" but says that the staff of International Building Company, the group that manages the City Museum building and its neighbor at 1509 Washington Avenue, and City Museum employees will keep the museum on track.

"It's a team effort, and they're all united to control me," Cassilly said.

- Caption: PHOTOCOLOR PHOTO HEADSHOT - Bob Cassilly
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