National Eagle Center ready to hatch next big step

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Angel, one of the National Eagle Center’s eagle ambassadors, sits in the viewing room on Feb. 2. The eagle ambassadors have been injured and cannot survive in the wild.

WABASHA — In the mid-1970s, the people of Wabasha took note that visitors seemed to pop up each winter to scan the treetops along the Mississippi River.

The goal for those visitors: spot a rare and endangered bald eagle.

“What happened is people would show up on weekends looking for eagles,” said Jerry Arens, who moved to Wabasha in 1980, then joined a group called Eagle Watch. Mary Rivers had founded the group a few years earlier, and was one of the original members to realize that with eagles coming to Wabasha, the town could capitalize on it.
“Where the (National Eagle Center) is built is a natural heavy current,” Arens said. “It very infrequently freezes over. Consequently, you have open water in front of the Eagle Center that is a fishing opportunity for the eagles.”

In 1989, the informal group called Eagle Watch partnered with the Wabasha Chamber of Commerce to organize a viewing area for eagle enthusiasts coming to get a glimpse of bald eagles, said National Eagle Center Executive Director Rolf Thompson.

In 1995, the group incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and in 1998 opened its doors at 151 Pembroke Ave. By 2007, with the help of state funding and plenty of donations, the building we now know as the National Eagle Center opened.

**Changes on the Wing**

Now, 30 years after becoming official, what started as Eagle Watch and turned into the National Eagle Center, complete with a declaration by Congress in 1999, is ready to grow again.

The Eagle Center received $8 million from the state last year to go toward an expansion that, if fundraising goes as hoped, will total $18 million.

To go with the state funding, the Eagle Center is working to collect another $10 million in donations over the next three years. So far, just reaching out to local donors, the campaign has raised $2.7 million. The next step will be to reach out to donors regionally then, finally, nationally.

“We have confidence we can do this,” Thompson said. “And certainly, we believe in the mission and the vision and the value to the state of Minnesota of having the Eagle Center in our state.”

That expansion, Thompson said, will include a 125-seat theater for classes, more room to take care of the center’s captive eagles, space for the Preston Cook Collection to be stored and exhibited, and, frankly, the room the Eagle Center has needed to grow for several years now.
Visitors from afar

In 2016, the Eagle Center hit its high-water mark in attendance, seeing 83,000 people walk through its doors. The numbers have held fairly steady, with 2018 seeing another 80,000 visitors.

It’s not that the Eagle Center can’t attract many more visitors to otherwise sleepy Wabasha along the Mississippi River. But there just isn’t room in the building’s 15,000 square feet. So the Eagle Center plans to expand, adding another 15,000 square feet and an outdoor amphitheater in a joint project that will see the city upgrading the riverfront, including docking space for paddlewheel riverboats.

“They’ll get off the boat right at our doors,” Thompson said.

Economic impact has long been a consideration in everything the Eagle Center does, from the early days of helping visitors find a place to see rare, endangered bald eagles to today.

“We still see economic development as a driver for all of this,” Thompson said. “Back then, the community took its best assets — the river and the abundance of eagles — and turned that into an economic engine for the town and the region.”

Mayo Clinic has talked about the Eagle Center as an asset for Destination Medical Center, Thompson said, and the proof is in the Mayo patients who are seen almost daily, breathing masks covering their mouths and noses, wandering the center.

But the real reach of the Eagle Center is the whole world. Thompson said a few weeks back, when a heavy snowstorm kept most visitors away, a party traveling from the airport in Minneapolis came through on their way to a business meeting in La Crosse. Among them, four Japanese visitors who insisted on stopping at the Wabasha attraction.

“They were just enthralled at seeing the eagles in the wild fishing right outside our windows,” Thompson said.

They aren’t the only ones. King Hussain of Jordan, when getting treatment at the Mayo Clinic in 1998, made a trip to Wabasha. In fact, Thompson said, his wife, Queen Noor, mentioned the trip to the Eagle Center in her biography.

Three E’s for The Eagle Center

As popular as the Eagle Center has been, it’s running out of room.

Thompson said the expansion project is all about the “three E’s.” That’s eagles, education and exhibits.
With the death a few years back of Harriet, the Eagle Center’s first “eagle ambassador,” Thompson said the eagle experts at the center learned a few things. First, when eagles get older, they need to retire from public life. But since the eagles who live at the Eagle Center cannot go back to the wild, that means giving them a comfortable place to live.

The Eagle Center has also discovered that five live eagles, four bald and one golden, aren’t enough to meet the many requests the Eagle Center gets for live birds.

“I’d like to take an eagle to every town on the Mississippi that has an ‘Eagle Days’ celebration,” Thompson said.

That said, Thompson and his staff would like to have about 15 total eagles, giving eagle ambassadors a chance to get some down time from their jobs. That means more space behind the scenes for the birds and for training and housing of eagles.

“We have these birds for their life, and they will all eventually get to where they retire for their own health and safety,” he said. “Near the end, Harriet could not be standing in front of the public.”

The second E is education. On a weekend day during March when the Eagle Center hosts its Soar With The Eagles Days, the attraction can see 1,200 visitors a day. “We have one, 75-seat classroom,” Thompson said. “Just do the math. We can’t accommodate as many people as we would like to have that experience.”

The Eagle Center’s education director, Scott Mehus said that despite being de-listed as a threatened species, the bald eagle still faces threats, and the public still needs to be educated about the species as well as golden eagles and other environmental or habitat issues.

Finally, when the Eagle Center accepted a donation of 25,000 pieces of art and artifacts all about eagles from collector Preston Cook, Thompson said, the organization’s leadership understood it needed a place not just to show off the collection but also to store and plan curated exhibitions.
“The third E is mostly about the Preston Cook Collection,” Thompson said. “That’s 25,000 items we’ve been given that will help us connect people to what Eagles have meant to Americans throughout our history.”

With Cook set to publish a book about his collection this April, the exhibition space will become vital, Thompson said.

**Next steps, incubating**

Thompson said the Eagle Center and the city will work together with other stakeholders to start the pre-design process, with those preliminary plans being done in early July and ready for public input.

Arens said from those early days of setting up watch parties along the banks of the Mississippi River, the bald eagle and the National Eagle Center have come a long way.

“We’ve had an assessment of the 80,000 people who visit Wabasha each year, and they bring $2.9 million to region,” Arens said. “I think with the changes that are occurring — and with the Preston Cook collection — the unique experience that is the Eagle Center, it’ll be a destination point.”

The educational opportunities will expand. The art collection will give the Eagle Center the feel of a quality museum. Then there are the live eagles, he said.

When he served as Eagle Watch president 20 years ago, Arens said, he recalled a Sunday in the viewing area when 1,500 people showed up.

“I don’t ever know I envisioned it to be an attraction with 85,000 visitors a year,” he said, “But the eagle, because it’s such a majestic bird, it’s such an attraction.”