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# Conner Prairie plans balloon attraction



By Gretchen Becker

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A planned \$2 million recreation of a historic balloon flight would give Conner Prairie visitors a bird's-eye view of the Fishers living-history museum.

The project was expected to be announced today, said Ellen Rosenthal, Conner Prairie president and chief executive officer.

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Beginning in June, a \$10 ticket would let museum guests take a 15- to 20-minute hot-air balloon ride at an elevation of 350 feet.

Rosenthal said Friday that the Balloon Voyage exhibit commemorates John Wise's 1859 launch of the first manned balloon intended to travel cross-country, from Lafayette to New York.

"It is one symbolic event that draws attention to how much progress and scientific advancement was being made," Rosenthal said. "At this event, 20,000 people were there. There were only 19,000 people in Indianapolis then. (Since) 2009 is also the 150th anniversary . . . it's now or never to do the exhibit."

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Wise, a Philadelphia native, was trying to prove that mail could be delivered across the country by air, Rosenthal said. Winds on Aug. 17, 1859, sent him south instead of east as planned, so he landed 40 miles away in Crawfordsville. Although a train eventually delivered the mail, the landmark launch was still considered a success.

Dan Freas, Conner Prairie's director of museum experience, discovered Wise's story, Rosenthal said. To learn more, museum representatives visited the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., to which one of Wise's relatives donated his journals and notebooks.

Tom D. Crouch, a senior curator of the Smithsonian's aeronautics division, told Conner Prairie representatives he'd waited years for an exhibit like this to introduce people to early flight attempts in America.

The exhibit is to be installed in the current Clowes Common area next to the main museum center. Before that can happen, Conner Prairie must appeal a Fishers zoning rule to allow for the equipment, Rosenthal said.

The museum plans to renovate Clowes Common to make concessions look the way they would have in 1859, Rosenthal said. Plans also call for an outdoor exhibit to engage guests in activities such as filling gas balloons and trying on the helmets of balloon pilots, or aeronauts.

The Balloon Voyage would join other living-history experiences at Conner Prairie, which include recreated towns from 1836 and 1886 and a Lenape Indian camp from the early 1800s, when white settlement of the area was beginning.

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