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Detroit museums' millage proposal on Nov. 3 ballot includes support for Wayne, Oakland cultural sites


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Mayor and Council –

FYI only, as this question will appear on the November ballot.

- Victor



Neil Barclay (left), president and CEO of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, and Elana Rugh, president and CEO of the Detroit Historical Society, are seeking a new operating millage that would benefit cultural sites in Wayne and Oakland counties. (Courtesy of Wright Museum and Detroit Historical Society)



By **Sherri Welch**

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Key Takeaways

- A joint millage for the Charles H. Wright Museum and Detroit Historical Society will appear on the Nov. 3 ballot in Oakland and Wayne counties.
- The millage would also provide funding for other public historical museums in the counties.

- Both Wayne and Oakland counties must pass the measure — a requirement that shaped the proposal's unusual regional structure.

✦ AI-assisted summary, editor reviewed

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After a more than six-year effort to get it before voters, a joint operating millage to support the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History and the Detroit Historical Society is set to appear on the Nov. 3 ballot.

If passed by voters in Wayne and Oakland counties, the millage would also provide funding for other public historical museums in the counties in a regional arts millage, of sorts.

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Where other efforts would have put the millage in place in any county it passed, the new proposal needs to pass in both counties by 50% plus one vote for it to take effect in either.

The proposal is on the Oakland County ballot and being finalized in Wayne County. It was not clear why it is not on the Macomb County ballot.

“The most important things that people need to understand about Detroit and Southeast Michigan (are) housed in these two museums,” Neil Barclay, president and CEO of the Wright Museum, said of the Wright and Detroit Historical museums. “And to lose them would lose an important way of people talking factually about the really critical significance that Southeast Michigan has had on the world.”

The 0.2 mills, 10-year millage is half of what the museums sought in earlier attempts. It would cost the owner of a \$300,000 home about \$30 annually, said Elana Rugh, president and CEO of the Detroit Historical Society, which operates the Detroit Historical Museum and Dossin Great Lakes Museum on Belle Isle.

The new millage would provide roughly \$24 million in combined annual operating support for the larger museums, and they would raise money toward permanent endowments that would support all three museums in perpetuity, she said.

“That is what allows institutions like ours to stay healthy in perpetuity,” Rugh said.

In exchange, the museums would provide benefits similar to what the Detroit Institute of Arts provides for its millage, including free admission for residents of Oakland, Wayne and Macomb counties, busing for school field trips and senior citizen visits, curriculum guides and teacher training, Barclay said.



The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History and the Detroit Historical Society, which operates the Detroit Historical Museum (above right) and Dossin Great Lakes Museum on Belle Isle, are seeking a joint operating millage to help fund operations. (Courtesy of the Wright Museum (left) and Detroit Historical Society)

The museums received state support in recent years to help offset operational shortfalls and critical maintenance of their buildings as they transitioned to a millage campaign, leaders said. The millage is seen as a path forward to long-term, sustainable funding, the museums' leaders said.

The Wright received \$4.8 million in state support in 2024 and \$6 million in 2025 while the Historical Society received \$3.2 million in 2024 and \$4 million in 2023.

The Wright Museum and Detroit Historical Society have been raising millions of dollars each year to cover operations, Rugh said.

Still, the two organizations have operated at a loss each of the past two fiscal years, leaders said.

The Wright saw \$12.5 million in total revenue and an operating loss of \$1.38 million in fiscal 2025, according to audited financial numbers shared by a spokesman for the museums. The Detroit Historical Society ended last year with \$6.2 million in total revenue and a \$1.4 million loss.

The Wright Museum is among the first and largest of its kind in the country and spawned a movement of African American museums nationwide, Barclay said, and the Detroit Historical Society holds 300,000 artifacts spanning 300 years of American history.

At the same time, “there are a number of different smaller historical museums and ... historical societies within the two counties ... that could use some additional support,” he said.

The museums would continue to raise money toward permanent endowments that would support all three museums in perpetuity, Rugh said.

Of the total projected \$28 million total the millage will bring in annually, 15% — an estimated \$4.2 million between the two counties — will come off the top to support other public historical museums in the two counties.

The bulk, or \$17.7 million, of the millage revenue would come from Oakland County the first year, according to the ballot measure. The Wayne County ballot measure wasn’t posted as of Monday.

The museums initially followed the same path to a millage that the Detroit Zoological Society and Detroit Institute of Arts did, working to get state legislation passed that would allow each of the counties to create their own arts authority and put a proposal on the ballot.

But it wasn’t without opposition. Going back to September 2023, Dave Woodward, chair of the Oakland County Board of Commissioners, **had pushed back against earlier millage language** that would have benefited solely the Detroit museums, saying residents of the counties putting the measure on their ballots would be asking what was in it for the cultural centers and museums in their backyards.

The Detroit museums’ most recent attempt at getting a millage on the ballot was hung up after **the governor in July vetoed nine bills**, including the museums’ enabling legislation.

“The alternate path that we’re on now ... turned out just ended up being fortuitous because of the veto that happened after all of this came through and the timing, frankly,” Barclay said.

That alternate route is Public Act 321, the Recreational Authorities Act of 2000. It allows two or more municipalities to establish joint recreational authorities that can acquire, construct, operate and maintain public recreation centers, parks and trails. Public museums were added to the legislation in 2003. The authorities can assess user fees, receive appropriations and place local property tax or bond proposals on the ballot.

The museums looked at it a couple years ago, Rugh said, but opted to follow the path the zoo and DIA had taken, she said. Then, with no clear timeline for a Supreme Court ruling on the legislation that was caught up in a political legal battle, leaders took another look at the act.

“We had just been waiting, but realizing things weren’t getting better for us. We still need(ed) a game changer,” she said.

They decided to pursue the path the public act enabled and worked with leaders in Wayne and Oakland counties, who were on board, Rugh said.

Wayne and Oakland county commissioners in late July voted to create the joint five-member authority. The Southeast Michigan Public Historical Museum Authority approved the ballot language and secured requisite approvals from the Michigan Secretary of State and the counties to be on the Nov. 3 ballot, she said.

“We wanted to make sure we were doing what’s best for the two museums but also help smaller museums in both of our counties,” said Alisha Bell, chair of the Wayne County Commission.

People appreciate that a region is only as good as its cultural attractions, she said.

“I think the residents of both counties will appreciate that there will be other museums in their respective counties that will be beneficiaries of this millage, making it more inclusive,” Bell said. “We’re excited to get this before the voters, and hopefully they approve it.”

Preserving the region’s main institutional historical museums, as well as local community historical museums, is important, said Woodward, the Oakland County commissioner.

The Wright and Detroit historical museums “are so critically important to our all of our history, and then coupled with the importance of finding a mechanism to sustain and support our local museums, it’s appropriate to be able to ask the voters: Is this something important that you value, like we have for our other cultural institutions in the region?” Woodward said.



Exhibits at the Detroit Historical Museum in Detroit tell the story of the city, its people and businesses. (Detroit Historical Society)

Institutions like the Zekelman Holocaust Center in Farmington Hills, the Pontiac Transportation Museum and the Royal Oak Historical Society are not operating at the scale and size of the Detroit museums, Woodward said, but are equally important to sharing history.

Each of the counties’ commissions and executive will set up the process for how funding for other smaller public historical museums will be distributed, Woodward said.

With its regional millage in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties, the DIA has been able to take the museum far beyond its walls, Woodward said, and there’s similar opportunity for the large and small museums in the region that would benefit from the proposed new millage to share a more complete history of the area.

“From an economic development point of looking at local tourism, our communities (and) our downtowns, these arts and culture institutions are and can be things that bring people to areas,” he said.

At a time when many communities have asked their residents to approve millages and bond proposals for schools, public safety and infrastructure improvements — some unsuccessfully — why do officials believe a museum millage request will pass?

“I have been working on this for two years with a lot of encouragement to find a way forward. Voters have been contacting me with overwhelming support,” Woodward said.

Polling done over the summer for the joint operating millage for the museums was positive, the leaders said.

“Our institutions hold a special place in Southeast Michigan and are woven into its fabric, which is why we are confident we will see bipartisan support from residents across Oakland and Wayne Counties,” Rugh and Barclay said in a joint statement. “At the end of the day, our museums represent all of our stories, whether people live in the city or the suburbs. We know that preserving our history and educating future generations are exactly what voters will be eager to support.”

Editor’s note: The original version of this report misstated the year that public museums were added to the Recreational Authorities Act. This version is correct.

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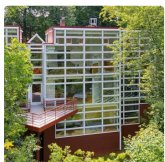
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