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90 years, \$90 million for charity
Rasmuson donates stock
By Mike Dunham

At his 90th birthday party Monday night, Elmer Rasmuson announced a gift of his own -- \$90 million in stocks to be divided between two of his favorite organizations.

The main recipient will be the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, where the birthday fete took place. The Anchorage Museum Foundation will get \$50 million to expand the museum. He will give the other \$40 million to the Rasmuson Foundation, which gives grants to nonprofit groups statewide.

The gift appears to be the largest single private donation in the history of Alaska.

Gov. Tony Knowles, who was among the birthday party guests, called it an "act of extraordinary philanthropy (that) will have timeless benefits for Alaska families by expanding this place where we can celebrate Alaska history, culture and art."

Helen Howarth, executive director of the Alaska State Council on the Arts, called Rasmuson "a modern Medici," referring to the Italian Renaissance family that sponsored Michelangelo. "It's wonderful to see one of Alaska's most prominent businessmen recognized and support the arts at this high level." It's every nonprofit's dream come true."

Rasmuson, former president and now chairman emeritus of the National Bank of Alaska, was instrumental in starting the museum 31 years ago, when he was the mayor of Anchorage. The museum has been enlarged several times since. But, Rasmuson insisted, continued growth is essential.

"A museum that does not expand is a stagnant museum," he said, "and a stagnant museum is a dead museum."

New impetus for expansion came in 1996 when the city added land to the museum site and named the property the Rasmuson Center. Buildings on the additional property are in use as museum offices and as the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of Natural History Arctic Studies Center.

As a member of the Smithsonian's board of directors from 1994-97, Rasmuson pushed for locating the Arctic Studies Center, the first Smithsonian "branch office" of its kind, in Anchorage. He expects that the expanded facility will provide space for the center to house exhibits on loan from the Smithsonian, and make it possible for the museum to do more science, industry and children's exhibits.

In a preparatory interview, Rasmuson said his desire to hold onto Alaska's heritage was fueled in 1943 when he returned from New York to the territory to run his family's bank. One of the first items of business involved the estate of a teacher who had amassed a valuable collection of Alaska artifacts. "No one in Alaska could buy them," Rasmuson said. "It all went to Portland. I made up my mind that I would try to keep these things in Alaska."

Since then he has made many donations of art, artifacts and documents to the Anchorage museum, University of Alaska and other public collections.

His birthday donation will create a fivefold increase in the assets of the Rasmuson Foundation. By law, the foundation must distribute 5 percent of its assets each year. "We'll become more proactive, seeking out continuing projects and projects that have the potential for other public support if we step into the breach," Rasmuson said.

"Giving is contagious, too, you know."

Historic preservation projects are high on Rasmuson's list. "We need to step up recording our oral histories. Up at the University (in Fairbanks) we have boxes of film, motion and stills, and diaries that need to be collated," he said.

Rasmuson expects to accomplish the stock transfers this year. Then he added, "The charm of Alaska is that you can help write a few pages of history, instead of just reading them."