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Opinion Columnist ; Board should embrace Alamo's entire story

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San Antonians who work downtown, especially those who work near the Alamo, get a common question from tourists.
“Where's the Alamo?” they ask.

Sometimes, they're standing just a half-block away from the historic site that was a Native American encampment before it became Mission San Antonio de Valero and served as a Tejano settlement - only later becoming famous for a siege and battle in 1836 that lasted 13 days.

To be fair, it also has become famous for the myths built around that siege.

It's not surprising tourists and natives are sometimes bewildered by the Alamo's position in the middle of a busy downtown street not closed to traffic. It's no doubt jarring to see the Alamo so close to less-than-attractive retailing and costumed characters barking on behalf of an amusement venue.

Perhaps people expect something grander, more respectful or unobstructed. The juxtaposition can strike them as wrong.

The Alamo Plaza Advisory Committee can begin to right that wrong and several others.

Charged with arriving at principles that will guide the Alamo Plaza's long-term master planning, San Antonio can hope its 21 members will take a long view of the site's history - perhaps one in which the 1836 battle need not serve as the “entry point” to telling a more complete story.

City and county efforts to win World Heritage Site status for its Spanish colonial missions also should be a top priority. That endeavor definitely is about a richer, broader view.

Last week, however, the committee heard from some whose chief concern seemed to be to preserve and protect the Battle of the Alamo story.

More than 100 people were at a public meeting at the Convention Center, and they reportedly were divided on the emphasis on the story. Members of the Alamo Plaza committee reportedly seemed divided as well.

As important as the battle was to Texas independence, its retelling has remained contentious. The committee will have to deal with that in its deliberations. Mexican-American students, generations of them, haven't felt the Alamo story has been told accurately or fairly in the Texas classroom.

Tejano contributions to the state's development never have been acknowledged fully, and Native American history has all but been erased. Meanwhile, Anglo defenders and their motivations have been mythologized. At the same time, new cadres of Latino academics have begun to shed new light on them.

It's no surprise making the battle the “entry point” to telling the site's history would be contentious, too.

“We have an opportunity to right a wrong,” said Ramón Vásquez, a member of the Alamo Plaza committee but not a spokesman. “1836 shouldn't be a guiding principle.”

Those 13 days in 1836 won't be forgotten, for sure.
But as the Alamo Plaza committee moves forward, its work will be judged not just on whether the site's redevelopment is good for tourists and tourism, but whether it's good for San Antonians and Texans themselves.

Will people leave the Alamo compound and the plaza with a better understanding of a place with 300 years of history - more if you consider that it's also a Native American campo santo, or burial ground - or will they keep asking “Where's the Alamo?” and walk away with no better knowledge of the rich history on those grounds?

The committee's next meeting is 10 a.m. Sept. 15 in the Central Library Auditorium. The group will present its report to City Council late this year, and a master plan is expected to be completed in late 2015.

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