



Children's museum finds home on Riverfront

NEW ATTRACTION SET TO OPEN IN KAHUNAVILLE SPACE IN 2009

By Maureen Milford, *The News Journal*
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The five-year effort to develop a children's museum on Wilmington's Christina Riverfront is finally becoming a reality, with an opening date for the \$16.6 million museum scheduled for 2009.

Besides an opening date, the museum now has a home, a new director and has raised 40 percent of the money it needs.

Museum officials said they reached an agreement to occupy half of the former Kahunaville nightclub. Plans call for the museum, which will have access to the Riverwalk, to have an outdoor science playground facing the river.

"This is a project whose time has come," said Lisa Lessner, president of the Delaware Children's Museum.

The board of the children's museum earlier this month named Julie Van Blarcom, former executive director of OperaDelaware, as executive director of the museum. In the early 1990s, Van Blarcom ran the Arts Consortium of Delaware and its stabilization campaign for eight major arts organizations in Delaware. Under her leadership, the campaign raised \$21 million.

"I think this is one of the most exciting opportunities for me and the state. I haven't met anybody who isn't genuinely excited, and that includes funders and parents," Van Blarcom said.

So far, the children's museum has raised about \$6.6 million of the \$16.6 million capital campaign, Van Blarcom said.

Delaware is one of the few states in the country that doesn't have a children's museum, according to the Association of Children's Museums in Washington.

This is despite the fact that American children's museums, the first of which opened in Brooklyn in 1899, are now the fastest-growing cultural institution in the United States, the association reports. Today there are about 300 children's museums around the country, up from about 38 in 1975, according to the association. During the 1990s alone, more than 130 children museums opened.

"I think it's because it's safe, it's affordable, it's educational – and it's fun," Van Blarcom said.

One quarter of children's museums serve as flagships in downtown revitalization projects. Research in 2005 by Economic Research Associates in Washington projected that a Delaware kids' museum could draw more than 135,000 people annually.

"My hope is that [figure] is low, because the report was completed before the residential explosion on the Riverfront," said Bill Smith, vice president of the Delaware Children's Museum.

Smith said the museum will add to other family venues on the Riverfront, such as Frawley Stadium and the planned education center at the Peterson Urban Wildlife Refuge.

Work on converting the Kahunaville building, which is owned by a Pettinaro Enterprises group, is expected to begin in the first half of 2008, Van Blarcom said. The museum will take the southern half of the building, about 37,000 square feet.

"Everybody realizes this is the best opportunity for them. It's the least costly way to make this museum happen," said Jim Tevebaugh, president of Tevebaugh Associates in Wilmington, the project architect.

The entrance will be located near where the front door for Kahunaville was, Tevebaugh said, but "we're trashing the volcano. That's the first improvement we can make."

The exterior will be painted in bright colors, and the museum's sign should be visible from I-95, Tevebaugh said.

"We're going to give it a new image and a new identity because it's very visible," Tevebaugh said.

The museum is working with the Delaware Department of Transportation to have a cul-de-sac at the foot of Beech Street so buses can drop off children and turn around, Tevebaugh said.

Part of the project includes a large playground between the museum building and the Riverwalk.

Most of the money, however, will go into the interior exhibits and displays, not the exterior, Tevebaugh said.

The museum will be organized around eight areas: transportation; structures; science playground; geography; the human body; nature/environment; money/banking; and art workshop.

"The good news is we've had enough time to do our homework," Smith said.