

After financial setback, \$305M Miami science museum rises

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A new \$305 million science museum in Miami that officials say will be one of the nation's most sophisticated is on target to open in the spring, after surviving a financial setback that had threatened to derail the project.

Adjacent to the city's spiffy new art museum along the Biscayne Bay waterfront, the Frost Science Museum features a 500,000-gallon aquarium that will house sharks, barracuda, tuna and sea turtles; an Everglades exhibit; a state-of-the-art planetarium; an exhibit on the evolution of flight from dinosaurs to jet fighters; and numerous labs, conference rooms and hands-on experiences.

Hundreds of workers were recently putting finishing touches on the 250,000-square-foot museum.

"We're going to have one of the best science and technology museums in the nation," said Michael Spring, senior adviser for cultural affairs to Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos Gimenez. "These kinds of projects are all challenges to get done. It's worth it when people see the result."

Things did not look so good in December 2015.

After burning through \$165 million in county money for construction, the museum board was struggling to come up with about \$80 million in promised private pledges that were slow coming in. A plan to use the tardy pledges to get bank loans fell through, Spring said.

"They told us their only alternative would be to shutter the building and close down construction," he said. "That was a fairly dramatic moment."

Instead, the county came through with about \$45 million from a hotel bed tax earmarked for tourism and cultural projects and the museum was able to trim about \$25 million in construction costs.

The museum's main two patrons, pharmaceutical billionaire couple Patricia and Phillip Frost, were able to secure bank loans based on the fundraising pledges and kicked in another \$4 million of their own money to cover cost overruns so taxpayers wouldn't foot the bill, Spring said.

"This is an important personal project for us. We are committed to ensuring the success of the museum in the hope that it will inspire generations of children and adults," the couple said in an email statement to The Associated Press.

The big draws will probably be the planetarium and the cone-shaped aquarium, with three levels descending from an open-air upper deck to a view from the bottom. The open-air deck includes separate tanks for corals, a mangrove forest and a stingray touch tank.

"We didn't want to be a black box that is competing with the outside air and the sun," Frost Science President Frank Steslow said of the top level. "We wanted people to experience the rain."

At the aquarium's bottom level, people can view sea creatures from underneath via an enormous glass oculus built in Rome that weighs 80,000 pounds and is 13 inches thick.

The science museum sits next to the popular Perez Art Museum Miami, which opened in 2013 on a downtown tract known as Museum Park. The museum campus adjoins American Airlines Arena, where the NBA's

Miami Heat play, and Florida's largest fine arts center is across the street: the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, which opened in 2006. All are a short causeway drive from tourist mecca Miami Beach.

During a recent museum tour, Steslow said his project brings another cultural option to the downtown cluster of attractions. The hope, he said, is that they all can benefit from proximity.

"We think we'll complement each other really well," Steslow said.

Officials are hoping for about 725,000 science museum visitors annually, including an estimated 115,000 schoolchildren per year. Projections call for 62 percent of visitors to be from the local area and about 38 percent tourists.

Now that its planned annual county operating subsidy is being used to finish construction, officials say those attendance projections need to come to fruition to keep the finances on track.

"It's always tough opening something brand new and making it go perfectly," Spring said. "But I think all of the pieces are in place to give us a shot at doing that."

More information: Online: www.frostscience.org/

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