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Children's museum seeks \$10M to open at Playland

By: [John Golden](#) Posted date: April 17, 2014 In: [Construction](#), [Economic Development](#), [Education](#), [Featured](#), [Westchester](#) | comment : [0](#)

A rainy-day trip to Rye Playland might no longer be a washout for families and school groups if a persevering nonprofit succeeds in its campaign this year to raise \$10 million to create the Westchester Children's Museum in a restored historic landmark on the amusement park's boardwalk on the Long Island Sound.

"Twenty-two thousand square feet of potential," retired investment banker William J. Haley said on a recent tour of Playland's North Bathhouse, a long-vacant structure built in 1928 and newly repaired by Westchester County, along with the park's South Bathhouse, at a cost of about \$7 million. The many-columned, naturally lit pavilion could open by the end of 2015 as an interactive museum space where toddlers and kids in their preteen years – and their adult companions – can traverse and play on a multilevel climbing sculpture with a safety net that spans about half the length of the building high above the exhibits floor.



Tracy Kay, left, executive director of Westchester Children's Museum, and William Haley, museum board treasurer, at the museum's future home at Playland.

Museum directors plan to add a performance theater at the northwest end of the building, which also will house classrooms and a café and gift shop.

Operating year-round, "It will become its own destination," Haley said of the museum, an already approved project that is separate from county officials' agreement with Sustainable Playland Inc. to manage future operations at the landmark amusement park. "This is a very good project to be at the center of that revitalization of Playland."

A Harrison resident, Haley serves as treasurer of the nonprofit Westchester Children's Museum and chairman of its corporate capital campaign. He said the 18-member board and other volunteers have raised more than \$9 million in the last decade for the museum effort. Those funds have been used for operational expenses through the years, architectural and exhibit design costs, preparation of construction and bid documents, and to support the nonprofit's Museum Without Walls, an educational outreach program launched in 2010.

Tracy R. Kay, executive director and one of three full-time staff members of the children's museum, said the nonprofit has partnered with more than 40 institutions to reach more than 10,000 children in the county through Museum Without Walls programs that offer hands-on lessons in art and science.

Kay, a former deputy commissioner of the Nassau County Department of Parks, Recreation and Museums, said planning for a children-oriented museum in Westchester began about a decade ago with "some very committed, visionary women" whose core group was composed of members of the Junior League of Westchester on the Sound. Looking at county parkland for a potential museum site, the group contacted former Westchester County Executive Andrew Spano, Kay recounted.

Spano had just visited the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester with his grandchildren and was receptive to the group's vision for Westchester, Kay said. He issued a challenge: The county would bond for construction repairs to the crumbling Playland

bathhouses but the Westchester Children's Museum would have to pay for infrastructure improvements to convert the building into an all-seasons museum. That infrastructure work will cost about \$6.5 million, Kay said. Construction of the theater and exhibit fabrication and installation costs will bring the total project cost to \$10 million.

Haley said the county Board of Legislators "has been with us all along" in support of the project. But the nonprofit's capital campaign "went quiet for several years" while the county rehabilitated the bathhouse buildings and after Robert P. Astorino's upset victory over Spano in the 2010 election for county executive.

Astorino "put the brakes on everything going on at Playland," Haley said, "until he could develop a comprehensive view" of the chronically money-losing park and its future operation. The county executive, the Republican candidate for governor in November, gave his administration's support to the project last year.

Westchester Children's Museum officers last August signed a 10-year lease for the North Bathhouse with the county, paying nominal rent of \$1 a year, Kay said. The lease can be renewed for up to 30 years.

With a lease in place, the museum board in late 2013 resumed its \$10 million capital campaign. Haley said the nonprofit's 5,000 individual donors "will form the backdrop of the new capital raise."

Individuals to date have contributed 75 percent of funding for the museum, which receives no money from the county. Kay said members of the museum board themselves have donated \$4 million through the years of planning. Haley and Kay said the nonprofit has had good corporate support from donors such as Consolidated Edison Inc., Entergy Corp., TD Bank, Wells Fargo and Signature Bank. Museum officials hope to attract more corporate and individual donors with numerous naming opportunities at the museum.

All donors who give \$5,000 or more to the campaign will be included in the museum's Founding Family membership and have their names permanently displayed on a wall in the museum's entry area. Founding Family pledges can be paid over three to five years.

Donors can do as did Houlihan Lawrence, the real estate brokerage headquartered in Rye Brook, and have an interior architectural column in the museum named after them for a gift of between \$25,000 and \$150,000, depending on location. Naming rights to the museum's 12 windows on the Sound are offered for donations of \$100,000 to \$150,000, based on location.

For a \$1 million contribution, donors can have the museum's performance theater or its custom-built Luckey Climber named after them. For a gift of \$15,000 or \$20,000, a donor's name will be emblazoned on one of the platforms on the high-rising climber, designed by the late Connecticut artist and architect Thomas Luckey.

For donations ranging from \$150,000 to \$750,000, corporations or individuals can have their names enshrined on classrooms, exhibit galleries, a toddler play area or the museum's three permanent water exhibits.

A \$5 million donation gets the donor's name on the whole museum, according to a capital campaign brochure.

Kay said museum officials hope to start construction later this year or in early 2015.

While raising funds for construction, the museum this summer will host two interactive pop-up exhibits in its Playland space. One exhibit, "Build Your Own Roller Coaster," developed by the Ontario Science Center in Toronto, allows visitors to design and test their own variations on Playland's renowned Dragon Coaster.

Kay said museum officials expect to draw about 185,000 to 200,000 visitors annually from Westchester, neighboring Fairfield County, Conn., and the tristate region. The museum is expected add about \$4.5 million yearly to the Westchester economy.

Spring gala

What: The annual fundraiser for the Westchester Children's Museum

When: 7 to 10 p.m. Friday, May 9.

Where: North Bathhouse at Rye Playland

Who: Honorees Nan and Lear Beyer and Bets and Rod Miller, longtime museum supporters in Rye.