

## ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

# MILESTONE FOR MUSEUM

## Organization breaks ground on long-awaited Farmhouse learning center

BY LIZ SKALKA



Alex von Kleydorff / Hearst Connecticut Media

First County Bank Chief Digital Banking Officer Karen Kelly and President Robert Granata look at render the Stamford Museum & Nature Center Environmental Education Farmhouse during groundbreaking ce on Monday in Stamford.



**Alex von Kleydorff / Hearst Connecticut Media**

**Pictured at the groundbreaking for the Environmental Education Farmhouse are, from left, Stamford Mayor David Martin; Stamford Museum & Nature Center Board of Directors President William Aron; Gov. Dannel P. Malloy; Executive Director and CEO Melissa Mulrooney; Executive Vice President Harry Day; and Mike and Carol Fedele, co-chairs of The Campaign for Future Generations,**

**STAMFORD —** The Stamford Museum & Nature Center broke ground on the first major addition to its 118-acre campus in 50 years, a \$5 million farmhouse for environmental education programs.

The farmhouse was included in the organization's 2010 master plan, but was put on hold for years after the recession delayed fundraising efforts, executive director Melissa Mulrooney said Monday.

The state, cash-strapped and still without a budget, has pledged to cover over half the cost, more than \$2.5 million, officials said. The remainder comes from the city, which has committed about \$300,000, and private donations.

“This is the first major campaign that has been mounted in over five decades, so it's very exciting,” Mulrooney said. “In 2010, we were at the height of the economic downturn, and I wasn't as a CEO going to lead this organization into a campaign where we can't be successful.”

Officials point to the Stamford Museum & Nature Center as an economic driver for the region that draws more than 200,000 visitors a year from across Fairfield and Westchester counties and New York City, and employs more than 70 staff members. Its North Stamford campus includes Heckscher Farm, Overbook Nature Center, Stamford Observatory, planetarium and the Bendel Mansion museum.

The organization anticipates the new farmhouse will host over 600 programs each year for children and adults. In the past year the nonprofit has served more than 33,000 children from 144 schools through its “Aligned-with-the-Schools” program.

“What the new farmhouse will do is give us the immediate capacity to strengthen our service and our historic relationships with Stamford public schools and virtually every private and parochial school in Stamford,” Mulrooney said. “The river that runs through this organization is education, and that’s how it’s always been.”

The organization released renderings of a 4,000-square-foot farmhouse with a deck that overlooks Heckscher Farm, 10 acres with barns, pastures and animals. The project will add two new pastures and a rebuilt maple sugar and cider house. The farmhouse was designed by Hartford architects TSKP Studio and is expected to be completed in 18 months.

Officials marked the groundbreaking at an event Monday with Gov. Dannel Malloy, Mayor David Martin and members of the nonprofit’s capital campaign committee and board of directors.

“You know it’s a terrific place when you look over here and you see prominent Republicans and prominent Democrats both supporting this great institution, which has done do much for Stamford and so much for the region,” Martin said.

The capital committee has raised nearly enough for the farmhouse, and hopes to raise another \$10 million for the second phase of the project, an 8,000-square-foot astronomy and physical science center, according to Michael Fedele, who alongside his wife, Carol, heads the committee. The science center, which is still years in the making, would be a new facility for the Stamford Observatory and planetarium.

“We’ve been involved in a lot of different capital campaigns, Carol and I, but it’s a special one for us because of its involvement with us and our family,” Fedele said.

Several of the speakers shared stories about visiting the Stamford Museum & Nature Center with family.

“To the extent I grew up, I grew up here on the farm, on the museum property,” Malloy said. “So it’s great to be back and I’m so happy to have the state of Connecticut be a partner in the construction of this major project here at the museum.” [eskalka@stamfordadvocate.com](mailto:eskalka@stamfordadvocate.com)