

Stamford Museum & Nature Center in midst of first major construction projects in 50 years

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The Stamford Museum & Nature Center (SM&NC) may still be plugging along as one of the region's leading cultural and educational resources, but its need for a facelift had become obvious.

"We developed a pretty sophisticated master plan in 2008 and 2009," said Melissa Mulrooney, executive director and CEO of the SM&NC, which opened in 1936. "It was a two-year process to look globally at our property and determine what we, and the community we serve, really wanted us to be over the next 25 years."

That plan led to a two-phase capital raising project, The Campaign for Future Generations, with a goal of \$15 million. The first phase wrapped in November with the opening of its Knobloch Family Farmhouse — the SM&NC's first major addition on campus in more than 50 years.

Built over 13 months, on time and on budget at \$5 million, the 4,000-square-foot Farmhouse includes an indoor gathering space for nature and agricultural experiential learning, an overlook terrace with views of the SM&NC's existing landscape and pastures of Heckscher Farm, a large multipurpose room and mobile teaching kitchen. Enrichment programs will be held year-round for school groups, campers and families.

The Farmhouse will also provide a teaching environment for the SM&NC's Aligned-With-Our-Schools-Program, which over the past few years has increased by 300 percent, serving 33,350 school-age children.

Mulrooney said construction of the Farmhouse, first presented to the city in 2010, was delayed in the face of the recession of that time, "when we decided that we wouldn't do a major capital campaign until we were past such a challenging time."

Nevertheless, she said, the museum's educational programming "continued growing every year — we really had outgrown the space we had."

Mulrooney said the community at large had been "incredibly supportive" of the new addition, singling out the state, the city of Stamford and First County Bank as those that "helped make it possible for us to pull the trigger on getting the Farmhouse built."

The First County Bank Foundation, a longtime supporter of the SM&NC, has donated \$100,000 to support the ongoing educational programs that will take place at the new Farmhouse, to be paid in \$20,000 installments over a five-year period.

"The Museum & Nature Center is one of the best-kept secrets in Fairfield County for quite a long time," said Reyno A. Giallongo Jr., First County chairman and CEO and president of the First County Bank Foundation, who described the facility as "a regional gem."

Giallongo noted that First County is a sponsor of the facility's annual Maple Sugar Festival Weekend, a family-friendly event that draws some 5,000 visitors each year and revolves around the production of maple syrup from some 200 mature maple trees found among its 188 acres. The nonprofit is one of only two official maple sugar producers in Fairfield County, and annually produces 40 to 90 gallons of maple syrup each year.

The new Farmhouse "will really change the face of the SM&NC and bring it up to the 21st century," Giallongo said. "Kids have enjoyed it for years, but it really needed a facelift."

The second phase of The Campaign for Future Generations involves raising \$10 million for an 8,000-square-foot Astronomy & Physical Science Center, which is designed to bring together existing SM&NC programs under one roof for the first time. The Center's three levels will include a planetarium, two major classroom spaces, a public outdoor viewing deck

with steps leading into a 40-foot aluminum dome that will house the SM&NC's 22-inch Maksutov research telescope. An 84 percent growth in multi-generational science, astronomy and planetarium programs is projected.

Mulrooney said fund-raising for that project is ongoing, with roughly \$3.5 million collected so far.

Both the Farmhouse and Astronomy Center are projected to generate more than \$23 million in economic activity and create 116 jobs over about a five-year period, she added.