

Virginia Air and Space Center turns 25

2017-04-01

dailypress.com



Jonathan
Black

The grass was wet the night Bob Griesmer laid out in October 1957, but he didn't mind. The executive director of the Virginia Air and Space Center was transfixed by the Soviet Union's Sputnik launching through the sky to orbit Earth.

"Studying the sun. Exploring and turning to the moon to mars and beyond," Griesmer said. "These are the kinds of things that capture the imagination of both young and old that come here."

ADVERTISING

It's that wonderment that has been driving people to the downtown Hampton landmark, which celebrates its 25th anniversary this month.

The idea for a downtown Hampton museum dates to the 1940s and '50s, when King and Queen streets were a bustling center of commerce. That was how James L. Eason, Hampton mayor from 1982-1998, remembered his hometown.

By the time Eason became mayor, the hub of the city had moved away from the waterfront. One of his ideas to return foot traffic back to downtown was a museum, according to the Daily Press archives.

"I've been a strong supporter of the importance of the downtown for a long time. I think the downtown goes a long way in projecting the image of what the city ultimately would be," he said in a recent interview. "It's a good place to be. The focal point of a lot of people getting together."



Look Back: Virginia Air and Space Center

Eason joined forces with Hampton City Council and businessman Tom Chisman in developing a history center for the Hampton Roads region, with a focus on water, military and technology. The concept settled on a museum to serve as a NASA Langley Visitor Center and a history museum for Hampton Roads, costing nearly \$30 million. The building sits on Settlers Landing Road, near the waterfront.

"It's not uncommon, when people decide in a community they're going to garner \$30 million," Griesmer said. "They have to meet the needs and wishes of a large constituency."

The money came from several sources. Private sources provided \$6 million, the state another \$5 million and \$19 million in bonds from the city of Hampton.

Hampton enlisted the help of NASA Langley in 1986, which had a popular visitor center dating back to the 1960s on its campus.

The site was so popular, it was at one time the second-most popular museum in Virginia, according to

Daily Press archives. Security began to tighten for the campus in the 1980s, leading to the collaboration between the city and Langley, Eason said.

"That led to some conversation to move it outside of the gates," Eason said. "Outside the gates was not as much of a draw itself as the downtown area could be."

In a Daily Press article published in 1992, Eason said of the meeting with NASA Langley, "it was just a shot in the blue — just a chance to ask if they had any interest in what we're doing.

"We never had any inkling that —at the same time we were thinking about a museum —they were thinking about moving their visitor center. That really knocked us off our feet."



Pictures: Planetary Habitat at Virginia Air and Space Center

VASC and NASA operate under an agreement in which the two entities collaborate on how to engage with the public, according to NASA spokesman Rob Wyman.

"A NASA visitors' center plays a critically important role in being the face to the public. They have that role of helping to engage and inspire the public about not only what we've done but what we're doing now," Wyman said. "It plays a great role in educating and exciting young people."

Debut

The museum opened to the public April 5, 1992, as the Virginia Air and Space Center and Hampton Roads History Center. It had more than 100 exhibits and an IMAX theater with a five-story screen that showed documentaries and select feature films.

More exhibits were added in the following years, notably after the arrival of Kim Cavendish as CEO.

"What I found was that I needed to help them look forward rather than look back," she said. "I wanted to see a strong connection with the community overall. There was already a good strong connection with NASA. We needed to reach out to the community for partnerships and programming with the school systems in the area."

So the museum established a schedule of permanent and rotating exhibits. VASC added six exhibits in 1996, more than the three previous years combined. The museum hosted four traveling exhibits the following year.

"I just can't overestimate the importance of VASC for the community and life in general," Cavendish said. "It's a stimulus for the development of a downtown area for a place like Hampton."

VASC later added exhibits focusing on Apollo XII, cockpit simulators and "Adventures in Flight," which covers aviation history. To install "Adventures" in 2002, the center dismantled its history exhibit.

It also dropped Hampton Roads History Center from its name.

That year, VASC's IMAX was renamed the Riverside IMAX Theater after a \$1 million donation from the health group. The theater added 3D capability in 2003.

The museum added Space Quest in 2007. One of the last additions before the Great Recession began a new chapter for VASC.



Pictures: Unearthing Hampton's roots at the Air & Space Center dig

Recession and rebranding

VASC, like many museums across the country, struggled during the recession.

The museum began to average \$500,000 to \$600,000 operating deficits, according to Daily Press archives. Alan Archer, a board member for VASC for three years and assistant city manager in Newport News, remembers that time well.

"The things that come to mind are the decline in giving, a reduction in government funds previously designated for museums and special projects like the VASC and a downturn in a number of visitors coming into the door," Archer said. "It was happening with museums all over the country. None of them were spared."

In 2011, VASC executive director Todd Bridgford retired and Brian DeProfio, then Hampton's special projects manager, was hired as the museum's interim director by City Manager Mary Bunting.

"The downturn in the economy hit federal and private funding sources, as it did many nonprofits," Bunting said via email. "The city stepped in, and I sent in one of my key deputies to function as the director and help set a new financial course for the museum."

During DeProfio's tenure, the museum paid off a \$2.1 million loan from SunTrust on which it had defaulted. Full-time staff was halved to 17 employees and NASA cut \$1.2 million from the center's \$1.6 million annual contract, [according to Daily Press archives](#).

DeProfio returned to city work in 2014, when the museum hired Griesmer from The New Children's Museum in West Hartford, Conn.

Under Griesmer's leadership, the museum curtailed deficits to nearly \$143,000. It was recognized for its service to NASA Langley and returned to the black, once again making a profit.

That's a good thing for the Downtown Hampton Development Partnership, which sees VASC as one of the city's top attractions.

"It's one of our anchors right now," said Jimmy Cerracchio, executive director of the partnership. "They're working really hard to make sure they stay fresh to the public. The current management is making sure they're bringing in new exhibits to keep people engaged."

CAPTION

The [lunar habitat](#) is the one of the largest additions to the museum since the recession. It's a concept

NASA Langley worked on for the past decade to understand space-related opportunities for astronauts and the public. NASA Langley celebrates its centennial in Hampton in July.

"We felt that was something that told the story of what research Langley is doing here to show how humans work and live in space," Wyman said.

The addition of the lunar exhibit is part of Griesmer's attempts to rebrand VASC.

"We have made great strides in the last two and a half years in rebranding ourselves in the community as the NASA Langley Visitor Center," Griesmer said. "This should not be underestimated in terms of the importance of how we define that transformation."

Part of that alteration has been more noticeable than others. Shortly after his arrival, Griesmer added IMAX admission into the price of every ticket, nearly doubling the cost. The center now uses its theater to highlight documentaries that align with the center's educational mission. It will show feature films only on special occasions.

Its education mission refocuses on STEM — science, technology, engineering and math — programs that VASC said "tens of thousands" of school children visit annually. The center has done away with assemblies to give students time in VASC's classrooms and exhibits.

"We're not building classrooms anymore, we're building laboratories," Griesmer said. "It will be a gradual transformation to the 21st century learning environment."

Black can be reached by phone at 757-247-4607.

Notable dates

1982: Jimmy Eason becomes Hampton mayor and floats the idea of a museum to bring foot traffic back to Hampton

1986: Collaboration between city of Hampton and NASA Langley starts

1987: Museum named Virginia Air & Space Center and Hampton Roads History Center

1992: Museum opens with IMAX center

1996: Six permanent exhibits added

2002: History portion of museum ends

2003: IMAX adds 3D capabilities

2007: Space quest exhibit added

2012: Museum defaults on \$2.1 million loan and cuts staff in half

2016: Lunar habitat exhibit added

The Astronaut's Table

The Virginia Air and Space Center will celebrate its 25th anniversary with a cocktail event 6 p.m. April 22. Science demonstrations, food stations and bars will be set up around the museum for guests to mingle. Tickets are \$75.

More info: vasc.org or 757-727-0900.

Visiting the Virginia Air and Space Center

Where: 600 Settlers Landing Road in Hampton.

Hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, noon-5 p.m. Sunday.

Tickets: General admission is \$18.50 for adults, \$15 for children 3-18 and students with ID, \$16.50 for seniors and \$15.50 for military and NASA employees.

Info: vasc.org or 757-727-0900.

Copyright (c) 2017 Daily Press