

Back in the black, Virginia Air and Space Center charts new course

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Bob Griesmer stands in the middle of Settlers Landing Road, pointing excitedly at the side of the nine-story-tall building that houses the Virginia Air and Space Center.

One of Griesmer's crowning achievements in his 13 months as VASC executive director hangs on the wall: two big [NASA](#) logos, in recognition of the center's service to NASA Langley Research Center.

"The NASA people said, 'We finally feel like we've got a visitor's center,' " Griesmer says with glee, still standing in the middle of the road. "It's so simple, it's just a sign, but do you know how proud they are of that? They just glow every time they look at it."

A year after bringing in the veteran museum director, the once-foundering Virginia Air and Space Center is back in the black for the first time since 2007 and is moving forward with plans to totally revamp itself.

While the financial and visitor figures are looking up, officials say there's still a long way to go yet for the center, which has drawn people to downtown Hampton for 23 years.

VASC's last profitable year was 2007 — the economic downturn of 2008 hurt attendance and NASA cut three-quarters of the funding for the facility's \$1.6 million visitor's center contract.

After VASC executive director Todd Bridgford departed in 2011, the city installed Brian DeProfio, then Hampton's special projects manager, as the interim director. He helped get the financial house in order, cutting expenses, employees and events not considered mission-critical for the center.

The center averaged \$500,000 to \$600,000 in yearly operating deficits until 2014, when the losses were cut to about \$143,000. VASC defaulted on a \$2.1 million loan in 2012 and later cut the full-time staff in half, down to 17 employees.

In the fall of 2014, DeProfio turned the reins over to Griesmer, who came from a three-year stint working to similarly rehab the operations of The New [Children's Museum](#) in West Hartford, Conn.

VASC is housed in the city-owned 110,000-square-foot building on Settler's Landing Road, but operates independently, overseen by a volunteer board of directors appointed by the Hampton City Council.

"It's been almost miraculous what has taken place there over the last few years," said Ross Mugler, Hampton's commissioner of revenue and a VASC board member.

Between July 1 and Nov. 30, attendance was up 15 percent during the same period last year, Griesmer said.

He declined to give a month-by-month attendance breakdown, citing concerns from competing facilities, but VASC's annual federal filings show that the center posted net assets of \$191,811 for the fiscal year ending June 30 — the first positive year-end balance VASC has had since 2007.

While attendance is still well below the 401,000 visitors VASC recorded in 2009, it is on the upswing — from 257,000 visitors during the previous fiscal year to more than 272,000 last year, according to IRS documents.

The folks at NASA are happy with much of what Griesmer's done, according to Rob Wyman with NASA Langley's communications office. Of particular note: those two huge blue and red logos on the building.

"It gives us a great sense of pride. It's wonderful to see the NASA symbol up there," Wyman said.

"The folks at the air and space center are embracing a forward-looking posture. ... They've really brought a lot of focus and excitement to making the visitors center somewhere people want to come to multiple times ... and to get kids in the region excited and involved in STEM," Wyman said, using the acronym for science, technology, engineer and math education.

"That's exciting for NASA because that's our future workforce."

A new three-year contract between NASA Langley and VASC, which took effect in August, has provided a little revenue bump, up to \$525,000 a year for the center.

Fresh paint

Some of Griesmer's moves since taking over at VASC have been evident — overhauling the out-of-date gift shop, for example. Out with the old stock that wasn't selling and in with the new, plus an update to a cleaner color scheme and additional lighting. That's all it took to more than triple the per-person profit from the gift shop, Griesmer said.

"A lot of this stuff is fresh paint," he said. "It's just popping and clean and fresh now."

His biggest move so far is only visible by the numbers up on the admissions board when you walk in: Griesmer rolled IMAX admission into the price of every ticket, nearly doubling the price to the current \$15.25, which he said visitors have been largely receptive to.

Another major overhaul is in the center's programming — for instance, putting a moratorium on showing Hollywood movies on the center's IMAX screen in favor of shorter documentary films that jibed more with the center's educational mission.

Films with titles including "Journey to Space," "Robots 3D" and "Mysteries of the Unseen World" aren't blockbusters, but Griesmer says they are the kind of fare that people want to see as part of the museum experience, rather than hitting a two-hour feature film and not having the time or energy to peruse the rest of the exhibits.

That said, VASC will show "Star Wars: The Force Awakens" for several weeks starting in December to try to attract a new, broader audience.

Griesmer has previously said that the new "Star Wars" film isn't just a big-budget movie — it matches with the tone and theme of space travel and exploration that VASC celebrates and is the perfect way to reintroduce Hollywood films to the museum.

Bringing in more traveling exhibits that swap out every few months and cover a variety of topics is another way to keep things fresh.

"We believe people said, 'I've been there and I've done that,' " Griesmer said. "Now we're strategically moving in the direction of creating reasons to come back and feel like there's a sense of things changing here, whether it's traveling exhibits or new documentary films."

He's got big — and expensive — plans to keep people coming back.

Shooting for the moon

Griesmer said his next project is the west-facing wall of windows that arch over the main gallery where the planes are suspended and space capsules sit.

The coating can be seen peeling off the glass that allows the orange glow of the setting sun to wash over the aircraft and capsules.

Griesmer envisions a more animated light show.

"The lights dim and the light goes on (a plane) and maybe a screen comes down and shows the plane flying and you get a little 90-second vignette," he explained excitedly, his hands swooping through the air the way lasers may one day crisscross the large hall.

Maybe someone like [James Earl Jones](#) narrates, he said.

Out of the view of the general public, old classrooms have been refitted into learning labs for visiting school groups.

A new robotics laboratory — outfitted with 3D printers and collaborative stations for children to design and build their own machines and circuit boards — was stacked with VHS tapes and reference books when Griesmer arrived.

"It was an anachronism," Griesmer said. "In the old days, people used to go to museums to pick up literature and VCR tapes. ... Teachers weren't coming here to do that."

Across the hall, the anachronism lives on — a room with folding tables and chairs, cabinets and fluorescent lighting. It feels like a public-school classroom with no chalkboard.

Griesmer wants to turn this room into an earth science lab featuring wall-sized screens and ambient lighting. If a class comes in studying rain forests, those screens would surround the class with images as if they were in a field research station in the Amazon basin, with ambient lighting.

"The next class comes in, we're at the South Pole," Griesmer said.

His goal is to turn an "industrial-age" museum with static exhibits into a 21st century knowledge center.

Financial reality brings him back to Earth in short order.

"I have more ideas than money," he said.

The big hurdle

Griesmer said the museum is always seeking grants, including one with [Virginia Tech](#) to help stand up a hydroponics exhibit in one of the old welcome rooms on the center's first floor.

VASC has won grants to do different things — some to do with attracting school groups and creating summer programs for kids — but grants and a bump in revenue only gets a place like VASC so far.

"We're not out of the woods yet at all. The next year or so, we'll see if some of these things that (Griesmer)

has put into place will pay dividends for the Air and Space Center," Mugler said. "The big hurdle for him after he's been here a few years is going to be that there hasn't been a major capital campaign in several years."

"That will be the major test of the museum's financial viability in the next few years — can you fund major capital expenditures," without the city kicking in a huge sum, as it did when Hampton's City Council approved \$1.55 million for a renovation in March 2013, Mugler said.

For Griesmer, courting donors is going to take the same thing as getting people in the door in the first place.

"You only achieve (sustainability) when the community considers you to be relevant to their needs," Griesmer said. "There was a growing perception that the place was a little worn around the edges, and that is changing."

New exhibits, fresh paint, new programming and a whole new lease on life for the institution, Griesmer believes, will make people see the center's value.

"You have to constantly prove yourself to a donor base that is being asked to support a lot of organizations in the community," Griesmer said. He said excitement from donors who think that VASC is on the right track is slowly translating into increased donations.

"If you're climbing back out of a hole, it takes a little bit of time to re-establish that credibility to the community. And we know we have to prove that every day we get up and come here."

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