

Virginia Air & Space Center bounces back

2018-01-19

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The Virginia Air & Space Center is poised for liftoff as a visitor destination spot and a STEM education magnet throughout the city and beyond.

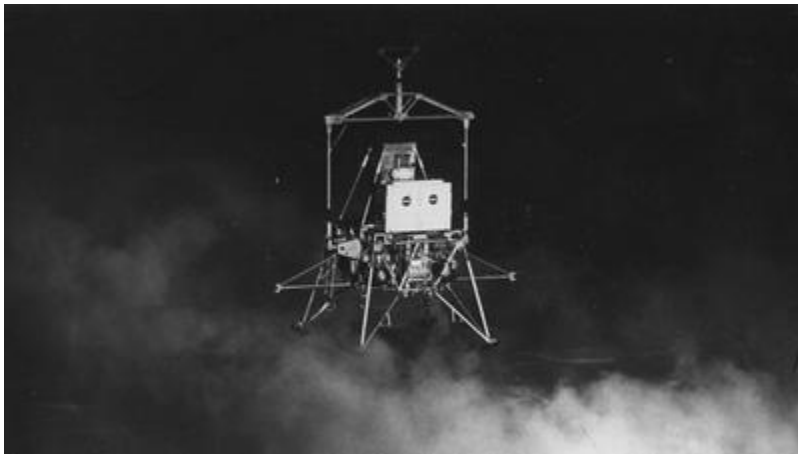
Robert Griesmer, the center's executive director since late 2014, seems more akin to an impresario – traipsing through the center pointing to the interactive exhibits taking the stage — while directing the transformation of this 25-year-old Hampton fixture.

“We are the only institute that has a Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo 12 capsules that went to the moon ... and we have the [Orion](#). ... The only place in the world,” he said.

In the three years since Griesmer took the helm, the center has done a 180-degree pivot for the better, receiving a financial makeover to revive its once-shaky fortunes.

With a spiffed-up gift shop, revamped exhibits, even new lights on the facade with the [NASA](#) logo to accentuate its affiliation, Griesmer hopes to pierce through the darkness to put the center back on everyone's radar.

Thanks to a restructured business model, an improved product and increased value to the consumer, official visitors' center for NASA Langley Research Center is beginning to see its earned revenues – attendance fees, food service, IMAX theater, gift shop — on the uptick.



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“We have been on a three-year strategic plan ... to improve our business model and the price-value proposition for teachers and the family members ... so they'll say, ‘This is an institution that is fundamentally relevant to my existence,’ ” Griesmar said. “We were going down until three years ago — we plateaued and now we are growing out of that.”

As far back as a decade ago, the center's finances hit turbulence.

In 2008, the center struggled to turn a profit and faced a mounting deficit, which at one point had hit \$3.1 million, according to tax information and audit reports.

It also had defaulted on a \$2.1 million SunTrust loan, meant to jump-start an \$18 million fundraising campaign to open new exhibits.

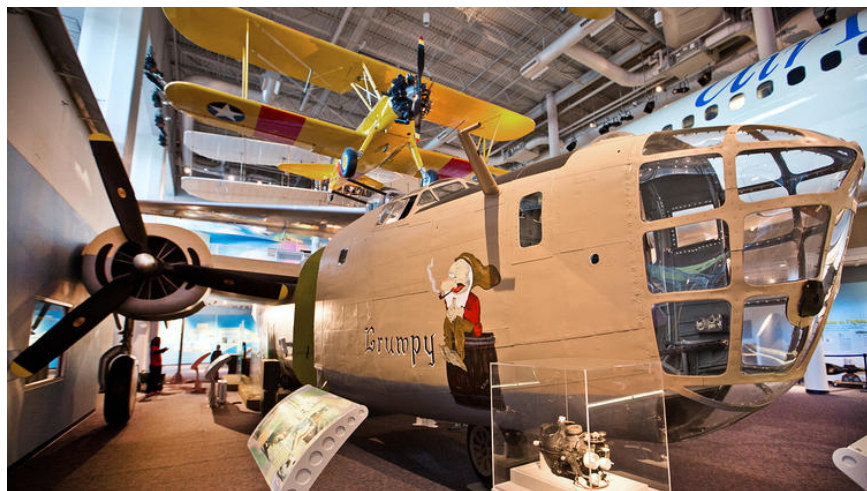
March 2013, the city set aside an emergency \$1.55 million bailout to help the center to scrape by and begin to turn things around. The city also sent in one of its own, Brian D. DeProfio, then its special projects manager, as an interim executive director to help resuscitate its finances.

In recent years, a mix of grants and other revenue-building strategies, including bundling the IMAX movie theater with the admission price, also played a part to improve finances, Griesmer said.

The results have helped to inject life into the center's once-failing earned revenue, now pacing in excess of

\$1.5 million, according to data for 2017.

In addition, the center's team — 20 full-time staff and 30 part-timers — has worked to improved exhibits and make them more interactive.



Virginia Air and Space Center

“It’s all about layering content,” said Danielle Price, director of education and exhibits. “The visitor has to have a reason to come back. We want to continue to engage visits.”

The city owns the nine-story, 118,000-square-foot structure on Settlers’ Landing Road and covers its capital costs and expenses, according to city spokeswoman Robin McCormick.

For the current fiscal year, the city also allocated \$162,000 toward VASC’s general operations. The center also received a tourism grant of \$181,000 from the Economic Development Authority to assist cultural and athletic organizations. she added.

City officials say the improved center will boost tourism and give convention and sports visitors, hopefully, more reasons to stay an extra night, or plan to return.

With a solid operating budget of roughly \$3.7 million, about 50 percent of which comes from donations, NASA funding and other private support, Griesmer says the center is poised to launch an ambitious set of improvements in the coming years.

The center has hired design firm Peckham Guyton Albers & Viets, based in St. Louis, to spearhead the improvements. The firm’s portfolio includes the redevelopment of dozens of science centers globally and other venues closer to home, such as [Busch Gardens](#), according to a release by VASC.

Some plans percolating include creating new educational IMAX programming, a sound and light show and state-of-the-art learning laboratories that focus on robotics, hydroponics, drones, aerodynamics and aerospace projects.

The center also is looking into the feasibility of hosting a capital campaign to raise \$5 million to \$15 million over the next five years to support future plans.

Another major initiative is the STEM 360, a multisetting and multiplatform state-contracted research project to explore how different levels of STEM interaction enhance student learning.

The research is program underway in the Hampton, Newport News and Suffolk public school districts, according to VASC.

Griesmer, originally from New York, has a background in economics and Latin American studies. He has managed in many corporate settings, including RCA International in Alexandria, Egypt.

He took on leadership roles at [The Children's Museum](#) of West Hartford and later at the Maritime Aquarium in Norwalk, Conn., and fell in love the nonprofit sector.

Griesmer admits he always been interested in space and perhaps it's fortuitous he landed in Hampton. He said when he was young boy lying in the wet grass in his backyard watching Sputnik fly overhead, it sparked his curiosity.

"I am so proud to be leading an institution that strives to do the same this every day for thousands of young minds," he said. "(Working here) is kind of coming full circle."

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