

Virginia Air & Space Center director: We need to reflect NASA's future and past



Joe Fudge, Daily Press



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What is new director planning at Virginia Air and Space Center?

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When Robert Griesmer looks at the towering exterior of the Virginia Air and Space Center, he sees a symbolic billboard.

The downtown building is bathed in a luminescent blue glow each evening as a part of a campaign to revamp

the museum and the way it interacts with visitors.

Griesmer, the museum's new executive director, wants to transport visitors to the sun's surface, teach them about flight and introduce to them the latest advancements in robotics.

The mission, he said, is to create an immersive experience for visitors that showcases NASA's latest technologies while providing a steppingstone for children into the world of science, technology, engineering and math education, often referred to as STEM.

Griesmer is entering his seventh month at the downtown museum known for its iconic architecture and suspended airplane exhibits.

He is also overseeing a museum with a significantly smaller operating footprint than existed just six years ago.

Griesmer spent more than two decades at museums in Norwalk and West Hartford, Conn., before landing in Hampton last November.

Since starting, he has overseen contractors hired to repaint the city-owned building's exterior and renovate restrooms. He's started moving new exhibits into underutilized open spaces and has created a new pricing policy.

When NASA's mission shifts and pivots, the museum needs to do the same, Griesmer said.

"We do a great job showcasing the past, but we need to also focus on the future of NASA," he said.

That includes newer exhibits focusing on climate change and sea-level rise, as well as advancements toward visiting Mars and exploration beyond our solar system.

That goal comes with challenges.

In the past six years, the facility's expenses decreased 47 percent, and there are 71 fewer employees, according to publicly available tax documents.

Those documents show the organization's net assets declined \$143,000 last year, although that's significantly less than the \$497,000 the center shed the prior year. The center has experienced small upticks in revenue while removing close to \$500,000 in expenses in the past year.

Attendance saw its first increase in six years, although 257,000 visitors last year is still a 35 percent drop from the 401,000 in 2009, according to the Internal Revenue Service documents.

Griesmer said his role is injecting vitality into the 22-year-old facility. An independent volunteer board directs the museum, but it does so inside a city-owned building using exhibits on loan from and, in some cases, owned by NASA and the city. The museum acts as the official welcome center of NASA Langley Research Center.

The museum is renovating and rebranding three ground floor spaces once used as classrooms. They will be used as STEM-based laboratories. A robotics laboratory is now undergoing renovation.

A solarium modeled after a similar exhibit at Goddard Space Flight Center will immerse visitors into a room where high-definition videos of the sun's surface and sounds recorded from an orbiting satellite will be projected onto three walls.

The solarium and a ground-floor exhibit for children that uses building blocks of various shapes and sizes named An Imagination Playground will open July 1.

"We believe this will be something you can just sit back and experience," Griesmer said of the solarium. "It's a tool that will put you right there so you can see and feel what it means to be on the sun."

The museum's ticket pricing has changed to now include an IMAX movie with the purchase of a general admission ticket. Adults pay \$18, children are \$14.50, senior citizens are \$16 and military and NASA employees are \$15.

"He does bring a lot of energy and enthusiasm and experience and a level of professionalism required to move beyond where the museum has been in the past 10 years," said Ross Mugler, who sits on the museum board of directors. Mugler is also the Hampton commissioner of revenue.

Former Hampton Mayor Joseph Spencer II said he's impressed with both Griesmer and the staff that's worked at the museum through the past decade.

"I've been impressed with the knowledge and background and ideas he's presented," said Spencer, who is also on the board of directors. "He's looking hard at books and balance sheets, and my first impressions have been very good."

For more information about the Virginia Air and Space Center and for movie times, visit vasc.org.

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