

Welcome to downtown

City's nature and science museum reopens today in new \$5M facility

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LAS CRUCES — The \$5 million Las Cruces Museum of Nature and Science opens to the public today with exhibits that range from a historic homemade telescope to live animals, ancient fossils and a high-tech digital video globe that's a window to our solar system.

After almost a decade of planning, the 9,400-square-foot museum, formerly

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housed at the Mesilla Valley Mall, will join the "cultural corridor" of city museums that includes the Branigan Cultural Center and the Las Cruces Museum of Art on Main Street, and the nearby Las Cruces Railroad Museum.

An invitation-only crowd got a sneak peek of the new facility Thursday night, designed to showcase some of the best of regional nature and science.

Where else in the world could you find a handcrafted telescope on a lawnmower base made by Clyde Tombaugh, the man who discovered Pluto?

Clyde's famed "Grazer Gazer" shares the "Light &

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ROBIN ZIELINSKI/SUN-NEWS

GUESTS AT AN invitation-only gala Thursday night get a sneak peek at the \$5 million Las Cruces Museum of Nature and Science, formerly housed at the Mesilla Valley Mall.

Museum

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Space" exhibit with Magic Planet, a four-foot, high-tech, interactive digital video globe that offers near-instant access to images and information on every planet in the solar system, along with developing weather systems on Earth.

You'll also be able to walk through "Prehistoric Trackways," a panoramic display of tracks of ancient creatures, and, with the touch of a button, have dialogs with Jerry MacDonald, the man who discovered and excavated the largest collection of Permian tracks in the world and managed to save the precious 280-million-year-old fossils in our own Robledo Mountains.

No animals killed

In the third major exhibit, "Desert Life," you can get up close and personal with a live tarantula and a host of other native creatures.

"The exhibit explores five habitats of the Chihuahuan Desert and includes 29 live animals, illustrations of key plant species and taxidermied desert mammals and birds," said city museum system volunteer coordinator Julie Hansen, who stressed that no animals were killed to create the displays.

"The (taxidermied) animals in these exhibits are recovered animals that died due to accident, illness or were obtained through criminal seizure by federal and state government agencies and are being re-purposed here as educational exhibits, showcasing regional animals we would be unable to keep as living creatures," Hansen said.

Bilingual displays

"Adriana Candia, a professor of Spanish at NMSU, worked very hard with us on our bilingual displays to make sure the scientific terms and explanations were accurate," Hansen said.

"I'm very excited. There are so many opportunities to grow and do so many things,"

By the numbers

- ▶ **9,400** square feet
- ▶ **1986:** Founded as Las Cruces Natural History Museum in Mesilla Valley Mall
- ▶ **\$5,060,000:** Total construction & exhibit cost
- ▶ **\$2 million:** Total exhibits cost
- ▶ **2004:** Planning started for new museum
- ▶ **2007:** Property acquired
- ▶ **2011:** Construction begins
- ▶ **Nov. 2, 2012:** Museum opens

museum manager Michael Walczak said as he moved items and critters from the old Museum of Natural History in the Mesilla Valley Mall to their new home. He's particularly pleased with a spacious classroom area that offers room for experiments.

City museums administrator Will Ticknor is happy with the renovated building's green profile, and anticipates top LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) rankings for skillful redevelopment of what was once the Rio Grande Bank building.

"It's safe and it's state of the art," Ticknor said.

In fact, the museum's green technology could constitute another educational exhibit in itself, utilizing everything from wind turbines and photovoltaic panels to recycled and low-emitting construction materials, energy-efficient LED lighting and water-efficient landscaping, toilets and fixtures.

The grand opening of the museum, at 411 N. Main St., will be from 4:30 to 7 p.m. today. Regular hours will be 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Admission is free. For information, call 575-522-3120 or visit online at <http://museums.las-cruces.org>

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