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Las Cruces Museum of Nature and Science opens Friday in new location downtown

By S. Derrickson Moore/dmoore@lcsun-news.com
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LAS CRUCES —The \$5 million Las Cruces Museum of Nature and Science opens to the public on Friday 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 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 Thursday night of the new facility, 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?

Tombaugh's famed "Grazer Gazer" shares the "Light & 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," said museum manager Michael Walczak, 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 the Rio Grande

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"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. Friday. 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>

S. Derrickson Moore can be reached at (575) 541-5450. Follow her on Twitter @DerricksonMoore.

IF YOU GO

What: Las Cruces Museum of Nature and Science

When: Opening 4:30 to 7 p.m. Friday

Regular hours: 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday

Where: 411 N. Main St.

Cost: Admission free

Staff: Michael Walczak, manager, Kim Hanson, education curator, Richard Quick, naturalist, Leticia Soto, administrative assistant

Info: 575-522-3120, <http://museums.las-cruces.org>

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

PERMANENT EXHIBITS

"Chihuahuan Desert Habitats:" Focuses on desert plains, bajadas, sky islands, desert rivers and desert grasslands, including 29 live animals, taxidermied desert mammals and birds, and illustrations of key plant species.

"Light and Space:" Exhibits include a four-foot digital video Magic Planet globe, a telescope built by Pluto's discoverer Clyde Tombaugh, a table where visitors can experiment with light, changing images of the universe from NASA's Space Science Institute, a mechanical model of the solar system, and an interactive exhibit on the color of stars.

"Prehistoric Trackways:" Fossil trackways from the Permian Period 280 million years ago when this area was part of an ancient seaway, media programs featuring local citizen-scientist, Jerry MacDonald, who discovered and excavated the largest collection of Permian tracks in the world, a life-sized cast of a dimetrodon, touchable trace fossils.

ACTIVITIES AND PROGRAMS

(Many free: Contact museum for schedule details, information)

Behind the Scenes Nature Center tours: 5-7 p.m. first Fridays of each month

Dinos A-Z: 3 p.m. Fridays, short talk on dinosaur or other prehistoric creature with images and hands-on component

Magic Planet Show: Learn about our universe.

"Night at the Museum 2013:" Two overnight programs for kids with activities and games: "Starry Night" on astronomy in April, "Spooky Science" in October

Animal Encounters: 1 p.m. Saturdays, hands-on introduction to the animals of the Chihuahuan Desert

Desert Treks: Field trips

Pre-K Thursdays: For children 3-5 years old and their parents or caregivers at 9 a.m. each Thursday: Planeteers! Grandma Mona's Science Storytime, Nature Kids, Dinosaur Train, Fetch!

Spring Break Camp: All four city museums collaborate on a museum spring break program for Las Cruces students.

Summer Science Day Camp: Crafts, experimentation, nature study and field trips.

Family Science Saturday: 2 p.m. second Saturday of each month.

Science Café: 5:30 p.m., last Thursday of each month, science round table discussions

Scout Merit Badge Program: 4-hour courses

Sky Safari: High-powered telescopes and experts from the NMSU Astronomy Department.

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