



PO Box 147
Chehalis, WA 98532
info@discovermuseum.org
www.discovermuseum.org

Project Overview

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THE STORY

In 2007, two women in our community had a vision to develop a children's museum in the Twin Cities area of Lewis County. This desire was driven by the need for a hands-on learning center where families can conveniently explore and learn in a creative and fun-filled environment. There are no family activity facilities in the Chehalis-Centralia area with a focus on early childhood education and many families travel outside the county to visit such facilities.

This need was clearly understood by the consultant who developed the Chehalis Renaissance Plan in 2009 and he included a recommendation to develop a children's museum in the plan. After the plan was adopted by the Chehalis City Council, the Chehalis Community Renaissance Team (CCRT) included the Children's Museum as one of their many tasks to accomplish. In late 2009, members of the CCRT partnered up with the original visioners and additional volunteers, to form a Children's Museum advisory committee. The advisory committee operates under the Friends of the Chehalis Community Renaissance – a 501(c)(3) organization.

WHAT RESEARCH HAS BEEN DONE?

Since day one there has been an objective approach to evaluating the feasibility of locating a children's museum in this community designed as a source to serve and nurture the learning needs of our community's children and families. Extensive research has been completed over the past 4.5 years. The advisory committee joined the Association of Children's Museums (ACM) which has been a tremendous resource. The ACM truly serves as a resource for all children's museums and is not simply a membership organization; they are impressive when compared to other industry associations. The ACM's publication, *Collective Vision: Starting and Sustaining a Children's Museum*, has been referred to many times to gain guidance through the planning process. The ACM collects metrics data from all museum members on multiple data points. We were able to review this data for museums in similar sized communities and extrapolate the data to estimate overall attendance to build an estimated operating budget. Also utilizing this data, a marketing/feasibility study was completed in March 2011 to study the attractiveness of a children's museum in our area. The study concluded that a western Lewis County region could support a children's museum facility with a 103% ratio of Contributed Income to Earned Income. The expected annual attendance would be slightly greater than 21,000.

The ACM holds a national conference every year and coincidentally the 2012 conference was held in Portland, Oregon. The conference is well regarded with all members we spoke to and it included over 100 sessions spanning four days. A special pre-conference was offered to emerging museums. Two representatives of our advisory committee attended the conference. A wealth of knowledge was returned.

The advisory committee held an invitational public brainstorming session in May 2010 to seek input from stakeholders on the reasons for a children's museum, what a children's museum should look like in our community, what it should not look like, and what would their vision of a children's museum in our community be? We were pleased to find out the majority of our planning, particularly our desire to provide a high quality learning environment, was in line with the vision of future stakeholders and all additional input was incorporated into our planning.

Over the past few years we have participated in many public functions to gain awareness for the museum project. Our largest involvement has been with the Southwest Washington Fair. We designed and built two extensive interactive exhibits, collectively costing \$10,000, to display during the fair. These exhibits served as a great educational tool in exhibit building and learning.

An important step completed was the development of our mission and vision statement for the Children's Museum. Along with this planning came the official name: ***Discover! Children's Museum***.

The group conducted phone interviews with six museums in similar sized communities to discuss their revenue sources, impact of the recession, school and education programs, contributed income sources, challenges to serving children over 10 years of age, exhibit sponsorship, new facilities, difficulties running a museum, poor uses of money, staff makeup, and any open advice. A common theme from the successful museums was they all began with a pilot project before jumping into a full museum. These pilot projects allowed them to test the waters in their community and gain vital support before starting up a large operation.

PILOT OPERATION

Based on the input of experienced, successful museums, a pilot project was opened in February 2013 to highlight a local children's museum opportunity. The pilot project was essentially a scaled down version of a full museum and was originally slated to be open for a six-month period. The facility location was in a 4,000 sq. ft. space within the Twin City Town Center in Chehalis. Four private foundations provided the funding for the six-month pilot. Numerous individuals provided countless volunteer hours to construct 12 interactive exhibits. A full-time director and a part-time staff person were the only paid staff during the course of the pilot. A non-paid Volunteer Coordinator was essential in recruiting and organizing volunteers, who played a critical role to the success of the pilot. We partnered with several organizations to put on special events that proved to be very successful. As part of our mission to strive to support a strong partnership with our schools to encourage children to learn by having fun, Discover! hosted 700 students and guests. As a result of the community's overwhelming response, Discover! was able to stay open an extra five months!

PILOT RESULTS AND WHAT WE LEARNED

The goals of the pilot project were to obtain results and measurable objectives to reinforce estimates for attendance which have a direct relationship to earned revenue; to allow the observation of child-exhibit interaction; to aid in the refinement and development of future exhibits; and to assist with determining what activities had the most engagement. Most importantly, the pilot project was the litmus test for the success of a future permanent museum.

The advisory committee is happy to announce that the pilot museum passed the test with flying colors!

We learned that:

- the pilot validated our “Education First” mission.
- we know how to design a space where children and parents feel safe and comfortable.
- we operated a safe and healthy facility.
- we confirmed that the community is very supportive, which was demonstrated throughout the pilot process from construction to breakdown.
- the pilot data supported the feasibility study.
- location really matters, as 35% of visitors were serendipitous.

THE PLAN MOVING FORWARD

The advisory committee has been busy planning for the permanent facility.

Focus on Early Childhood Learning: As stated earlier, our mission is to focus on early childhood learning. We want to provide a facility and exhibits for the use of public and private school educators and students, including the planting of early STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) seeds of interest. We will partner with Reliable Enterprises which has been licensed for over 25 years to provide Head Start in Lewis County. Reliable also operates a well-respected program called In-Tot, which uses qualified professionals to determine if young children (age birth to three) are well behind their peers cognitively or physically. Therapy, selected games, puzzles and interactions are then utilized to help that child “catch-up” as much as possible to their peers before the child starts preschool or school. Reliable has committed to operate both Head Start and In-Tot within the permanent Discover! because their staff and board have judged that the museum exhibits and environment will provide a highly valuable adjunct to the routine classroom. The classrooms and related space needed by Reliable are incorporated into the design of the proposed Discover! facility.

Location and Key Attributes: We are currently looking at constructing an 18,000 sq. ft. facility on city-owned property along Louisiana Avenue between Walmart and The Home Depot. This location provides high visibility, high traffic, and adequate parking, along with a desired outdoor area for additional exhibits, events, and play.

Budget and Funding Sources: The preliminary budget is estimated at \$4,300,000. We plan to seek one-third funding from the community, and the remainder from major foundations.

Educating the Community: Members of the advisory committee have begun a community education campaign to share the results of the pilot project and our plans for moving forward. We are reaching out to local service organizations, education groups, schools, preschools, public agencies, and more.

If you are involved with a group that may be interested in learning more, please contact us at info@discovermuseum.org to schedule a presentation.