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Aquarium unveils \$50M expansion plan

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NORWALK - The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk is embarking on a \$50 million endeavor to transform it from a regional attraction to a Northeast destination over the next 20 years.

As part of the planned improvements, visitors would be able to slide through a clear tube as otters swim around them, and children will be able to pet stingrays.

After an hourlong presentation by New York developer Tom Advertisement Hennes, president of Thinc Design, the aquarium's board of trustees voted unanimously to adopt the plan, which would be implemented in three six-year phases.

The board also authorized its president, Jennifer Herring, to commit the necessary resources for the elaborate plans.

"It's a necessary evolvement for the Maritime Aquarium in terms of their look and what they do," Mayor Richard Moccia said. "It will change what they offer and how people will get around the center."

Moccia, Hennes and Herring presented the plans aboard the mammoth SeaFair Art and Antiques yacht docked within sight of the aquarium off of Veterans Memorial Park.

"This is a very, very unique opportunity to unveil the future plans of our regional jewel," said Moccia, who also is an aquarium board member. "It will not only make the Maritime Aquarium one of the largest attractions in Connecticut but in New England."

He said the center, which expects to eventually increase its economic impact on the state from \$42 million to \$53.5 million annually, must move forward with the city.

Herring, who began working toward the expansion shortly after she became president of the aquarium in August 2004, walked the media donors through a high-tech tour of the center of the future.

"We're going to transform the Maritime Aquarium," she said. "The aquarium experience will start the minute you step out of the parking lot."

The plan, which calls for a new entrance taking visitors to the second floor and new orientation area, will add 20,000 square feet of space to the facility's existing 140,000 square feet and nearly triple the volume of aquarium water from 180,000 gallons to about 530,000.

"The ability to touch an animal is such an incredible thing," Herring said. "It's going to be an amazing experience."

Visitors will be able to watch shorebirds wade in a new salt marsh and stand before a seemingly endless stream of Connecticut's state fish, the American shad.

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Photos



[Jennifer Herring, president of the Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk, announces the facility's expansion plan yesterday. It includes a new entrance, top.](#) (Paul Desmarais/Staff photo)
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"The aquarium is a magnificent teaching tool," Herring said. "We want to make it even more magnificent."

In other exhibits, three species of sharks will swim past aquarium guests as they head toward a revamped IMAX theater that will present Hollywood films in addition to its current educational offerings.

"Aquariums have the wonderful job of offering the general public an opportunity to encounter the natural world around them," said Hennes, whose firm also designed the National September 11 Memorial & Museum at the World Trade Center. "Along with zoos and botanical gardens, they provide meaningful contact between people and the plants and animals that together comprise our environment."

Although the renovations will be the biggest in the aquarium's 19-year history, the center plans to continue its regular operations.

"The new master plan of the Maritime Aquarium provides its visitors with spectacular encounters with the other organisms of the Long Island Sound and the Atlantic Ocean," Hennes said. "As the master plan is implemented, the Maritime Aquarium will become a regional resource of the first order and a leader in its field."

Hennes said the project will start with revamping the great hall and IMAX theater, adding an interactive orientation space and reconstructing the main entrance.

He said the second phase involves reconstructing the landscape around the building, creating a beaver exhibit and river, stream and watershed exhibits.

The final phase will include the revamped shark exhibit.

The new IMAX theater should be ready to show "The Polar Express" in November, he said. Old favorites like the seals and stingrays will be granted additional space.

"I've watched this evolve over decades," said state Rep. Claudia "Dolly" Powers, R-Greenwich, a aquarium trustee. "I think it will make the Maritime Aquarium an incredible draw for the entire state, not just Fairfield County."

The aquarium's president told her board it was "a very special day" after the motion to accept the recommendation passed.

"This is not a design, it's a vision for our future," Herring said. "It has the power to transform people's relationship with Long Island Sound."

Among the most dramatic changes will be the expansion of the building toward the Norwalk River and the existing parking garage.

"We hope we can get a lot of people excited and invest in this," Herring said. "It will really give people a chance to think globally and act locally and make an impact right here where they live."

The transformation is to be financed with government grants and private contributions.

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