
Kids' museum tests its wings in Victoria

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The Children's Museum of Victoria Association has arranged for a special exhibit from Science World in Vancouver to be displayed at the new Parkside Resort and Spa, for six months starting March 7.

Photograph by: Adrian Lam, Victoria Times-Colonist

Think of it as a sneak peek at what a children's museum could be -- an attraction in downtown Victoria designed for everyone in the family to discover and enjoy.

The Children's Museum of Victoria Association has arranged for a special exhibit from Science World in Vancouver to be displayed at the new Parkside Resort and Spa, at Humboldt and Blanshard streets, for six months starting March 7.

The site will need to be rezoned for the specific use and the city has started that process. It's probably safe to shout from rooftops that another family-oriented attraction is coming to the downtown. It's that important.

We already have spots worth visiting, including Miniature World and the Victoria Bug Zoo and of course the Royal British Columbia Museum. But there is always room for another one, because it would help to build Victoria's reputation as a destination for people of all ages.

The new attraction, if properly promoted, could help bring more visitors here this year.

After a slow 2009, our tourism industry needs a boost and the Science World exhibit might be enough to tip the

scales in our favour.

And of course a children's museum would be a valuable addition to the educational and cultural opportunities for local families.

That's not all. The exhibit could help test the waters to see if there is enough support to continue with plans for a permanent children's museum here. The museum association has been working on the project for more than a decade and it has proven popular -- as a concept, at least.

It's been a struggle, however, to raise the money for a museum. The cost has been estimated at about \$15 million, about half of the cost of the Save-on-Foods Memorial Centre. It has also proven tricky to find a suitable location, although the Crystal Garden, Cridge Park and downtown Esquimalt have all been suggested as possibilities.

The museum would need to be in a spot close to other amenities and would require about 20,000 square feet. It would educate and entertain children -- and their parents too -- through scientific and interactive exhibits.

Children's museums have been around for more than a century. The first one opened in New York City in 1899, and helped inspire other museums to create ways for children to learn and discover while they played. In recent years the museums have embraced technology, which makes their visitors feel right at home.

Some museums encourage their young guests to dig through sand or rocks for dinosaur bones or gems, similar to the idea behind the "scratch patch" at Mineral World in Sidney. There is a maritime equivalent -- the "touch pools" at another Sidney attraction, the Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre.

Let's hope that children of all ages, visitors and local residents alike, dip into the Science World exhibit when it arrives in Victoria. Not only will it enhance downtown and boost tourism, it could pave the way for something more permanent.

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