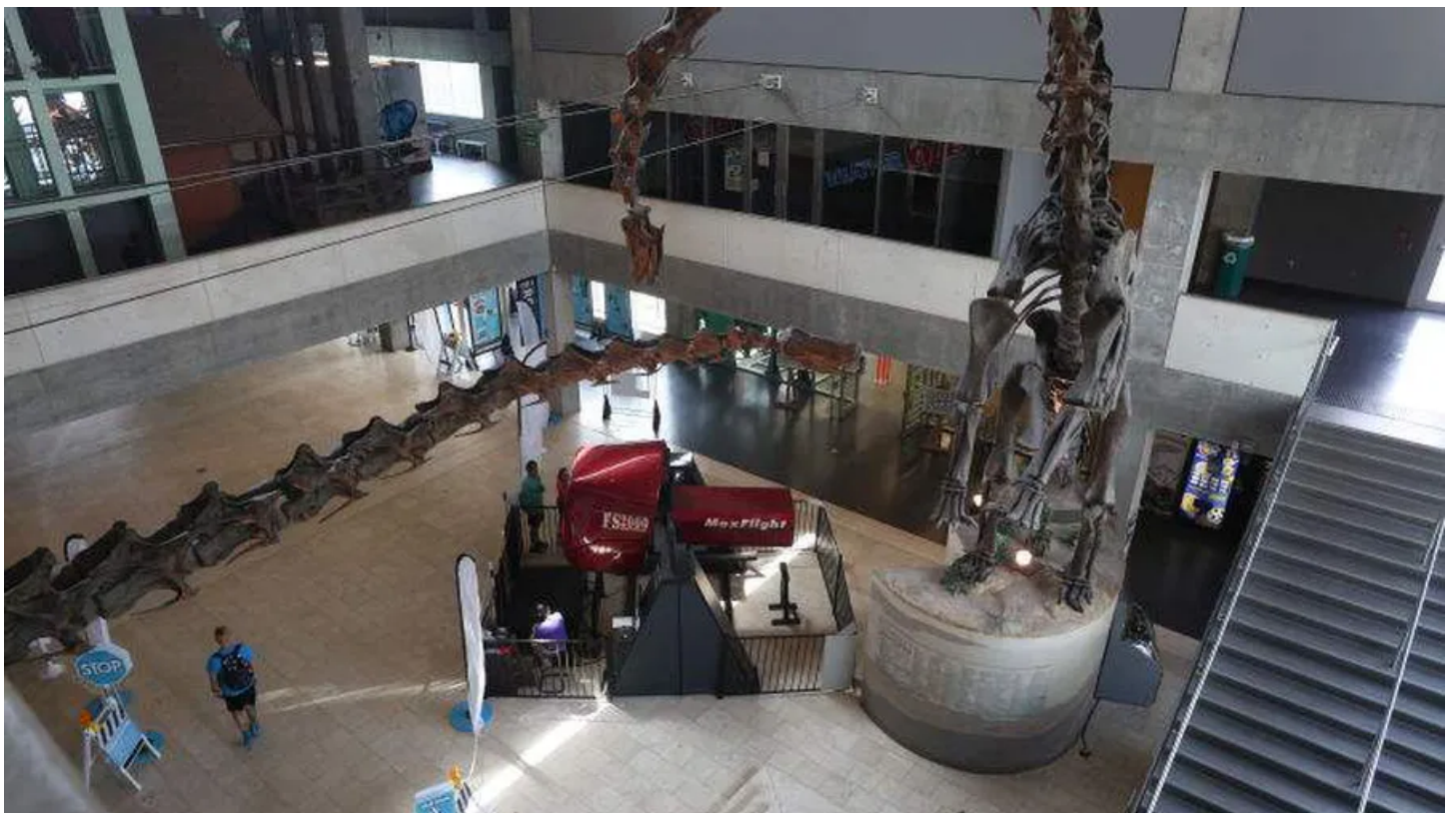


BUSINESS

MOSI to close most of its building, IMAX to save money before move to downtown Tampa



The Museum of Science and Industry will be reduced from its 300,000-square-foot campus to just 40,000 square feet during summer.

By **Steve Contorno** *Former Times staffer*

Published May 19, 2017

TAMPA — The Museum of Science and Industry will close most of its building at the end of summer, a drastic step toward getting the museum's troubled finances under control as it prepares for a potential move downtown.

The museum's original, 37-year-old structure will shutter, perhaps for good, after Aug. 13, museum leaders said Thursday. The IMAX Dome Theatre will shut down

as well. Any exhibits that are not eliminated will move into the newer Kids in Charge wing of the building. The ropes course will remain open.

The museum, known as MOSI, will close for several months as exhibits are shuffled with plans to reopen in the fall. About 85 percent of the building will remain closed.

The announcement comes as the museum continues to position itself for a move to downtown Tampa and the development of Tampa Bay Lightning owner Jeff Vinik and Bill Gates' Cascade Investment. The goal is to open the new building in 2022, according to Thursday's announcement.

MOSI's board voted on the closures during a meeting Tuesday. Reorganizing MOSI now will help its leaders, partners and the community prepare and plan for a smaller footprint in the urban core, said incoming MOSI board chairman Robert Thomas.

Museum consultants have consistently suggested to MOSI leaders that bigger is not better and that downtown museums thrive in a constrained, well-utilized space.

"We see this as a step toward a very exciting future for MOSI," said Thomas, the chief executive of Two Rivers Ranch. "We see it as a new beginning and not really an end for anything. We're continuing to provide the MOSI mission for the community."

Layoffs are imminent, Thomas acknowledged, though he wouldn't say how many people may lose their jobs. The future of a major traveling exhibit planned for this year also is uncertain.

Thursday's news is the second major shakeup at the museum this year, following the resignation of president and CEO Molly Demeulenaere in March. Chief financial officer Julian Mackenzie has assumed the duties of executive officer and will hold that position indefinitely, Thomas said.

A smaller museum will mean lower ticket prices. It will also mean less in expenses — key for a museum that finished 2016 with a \$1.3 million deficit.

Declining ticket sales have hampered day-to-day operations at the current site on E Fowler Avenue across from the University of South Florida. As of January, MOSI owed vendors \$1 million.

MOSI's board is working with its donors and Hillsborough County, which owns MOSI's building and the land it sits on, to retire the debt and operate in the black.

"By eliminating that massive amount of overhead and streamlining our operation, it's our intent to continue to operate at break-even," Thomas said.

Vinik's nonprofit charity, the Vinik Family Foundation, will have a seat at the table as the museum plans its next steps. It's the latest sign that Vinik is increasingly involved in MOSI's operations in advance of its move to his development with Cascade. Last year, the museum's board added two of Vinik's close associates.



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"MOSI is taking an important step today that will enable them to see their vision

task force about how best to move forward and looks forward to working with our partners and the larger community."

Once dubbed the largest science center in the southeast on a sprawling 300,000 square-foot campus across nearly 80 acres, the museum will be relegated to just 40,000 square feet during this transition.

The cost of operating the remaining space will shift to Hillsborough County taxpayers, unless the county can find someone to take it over.

County Administrator Mike Merrill acknowledged that if utilities and other expenses were unaffordable for MOSI, "it's going to be a problem for anyone else."

Merrill said there are no plans for MOSI to tap into its line of credit with the county. That could change if financial inflexibility from its debt prevents the museum from operating successfully under this new model.

"We want them to succeed in this new format," Merrill said.

The main MOSI building opened in north Tampa in 1982 and for much of its life was open seven days a week for families, school groups and tourists. It has served as the longtime home of Disasterville, an interactive weather exhibit that was heralded in its heyday but in its twilight years has grown outdated and frequently in need of repairs.

At its peak, the original structure hosted the captivating but controversial "Bodies" exhibit. The buzz generated by the display of human bodies — later determined to be unclaimed remains, not donated cadavers — lasted for months, filling the spacious hall. But the success of "Bodies" could not be replicated, and subsequent traveling exhibits likely lost the museum money, a 2014 audit said.

The IMAX Dome Theatre opened in 1996 and in recent years has generated considerable revenue for showings of blockbusters like *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. But maintenance for the theater was costly, and the museum had recently put on hold plans to update the technology.

Whether the IMAX theater will accompany the museum downtown is one of many decisions still unresolved.

"There's always some sense of nostalgia involved in transition," Thomas said. "But it's the next logical step for us to take in our move downtown, to trim up the operations and get it into a sustainable business model."

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