

\$24 million space museum launched

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Thirty feet underground, visitors will crowd around the base of a massive Titan II missile to marvel at the behemoth once considered the most powerful intercontinental ballistic missile in the United States' nuclear arsenal.

Later, it was used to launch manned and unmanned Gemini capsules into space. As pumps hiss and metallic parts clank, visitors will realize it's about to take off again.

Upstairs in the launch room, it will be all business, as schoolchildren operate consoles designed to send missiles into space, listen to a realistic countdown and scramble to address any last-minute glitches. As the Titan II lifts off with its characteristic deafening roar, the entire room will shake.

On screen, they'll be able to watch the long trail of flame heading skyward - not from the missile on display, of course, but from others, courtesy of launch videos provided by defense contractor Lockheed Martin, builder of the Titan.

That's the vision Colin Powers, director of restoration at the Evergreen Aviation Museum, has for Evergreen's new \$24 million space museum. And the facility is now beginning to go up beside its air museum twin, so his vision should soon become a reality.

The 30-foot pit that will house the exhibit hall's showcase Titan II missile has already been dug, and the cement foundation to support it has been poured. Workers are now beginning to put up the massive pillars that will support the equally massive roof.

Powers has his head stuffed with visions of the amazing experiences he will be able to create for visitors. But first, he faces a staggeringly busy 18 months, dedicated to acquiring and restoring exhibits enough to fill 121,500 square feet of floor space, the same amount being devoted to the Spruce Goose and other artifacts of human flight in the existing museum.

Meanwhile, construction is continuing on a state-of-the-art IMAX Theater, originally billed at \$6.8 million before more than 18 months of delay and numerous design changes swelled the pricetag to untold levels. Originally expected to open in November 2005, the theater is now targeted for opening in February or March 2007.

The prospect of getting going on the space half of what will become a true air and space museum has Powers delighted.

Although there are other fine space museums in the United States, there will be nothing quite like this one, he said. "It's going to be a world-class museum," he said, matching the aviation original it's being modeled after.

It will feature a footprint and look identical to that of the Goose's gleaming home, according to museum spokesman James Nelson. He said construction is expected to take 16 to 18 months, giving the new facility a projected opening date somewhere in the spring of 2008.

Some of Evergreen's current pieces will be transferred to the new exhibit hall, including, in addition to the Titan II SLV missile, a Titan IV SLV missile, piece of the Willamette Meteorite, replica of the Lunar Module, replica of the Lunar Rover and Russian Photon space capsule. A launch room with real consoles will permit the museum to offer an interactive simulation of a missile launch.

With exhibits weighing thousands of pounds each, the construction crew is having to pour an unusually heavy floor for the museum, Powers said.

The 30-foot pit will enable the 114-foot-tall Titan II to stand vertically, as if poised for liftoff. But it will still rise high enough to afford motorists passing by on Highway 18 a glimpse of its nose cone.

The Titan IV is even taller, so will have to be displayed horizontally. But that's not all bad.

Powers said, "People be able to walk right up to it, walk along it and get a good idea how big these missiles really are."

Powers recently returned from a trip with other museum representatives to the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, which is offering a generous package of exhibits, some on a donation basis and others on a loan basis.

Among them is an escape vehicle built for the Skylab, the first space station built by the United States. "This vehicle was going to be attached to that, so if there was a problem, the astronauts could jump into that and come back to Earth," Powers explained.

There's just one problem. The vehicle, now located in Virginia, weighs 70,000 pounds - 35 tons.

"We have to figure out how to get it here," Powers said.

Several other museums are also offering assistance, including the Kansas Cosmosphere and Space Center. It is building a 35,000-square-foot gallery for the new museum.

"The Cosmosphere is excited to be partnering with the Evergreen Aviation Museum once again on a significant project that will bring the dramatic and inspirational story of human space flight to their already world-class aviation museum," said Jeff Ollenburger, Cosmosphere president and CEO. "We look forward to working closely with their team over the next two years in creating a comprehensive exhibit that will position their museum as one of the leaders in aviation and space education."

Many of the items will have to be restored before they can go on display, as some of them have been in storage 40 or 50 years. Eventually, the museum plans to build a restoration shop, but for now, Powers said, the challenge will be finding some sort of makeshift space while the museum is under construction.

He hopes that many of them will be able to remain with their donors for the time being. Some, he said, can probably be stored in the IMAX Theater's spacious new quarters.

With the help of Congressman David Wu, whose clout just increased significantly with the Democratic takeover in Congress, the museum is also working to acquire a space shuttle.

Competition is fierce. "There are only four available, and a lot of museums are after them," Powers said.

However, Powers believes he and Wu have one big argument they can wield in their favor. "We feel the people that live on the West Coast ought to be able to have the opportunity see one of them up close without having to go back east," he said.