

Detroit Science Center shut down, faces permanent closure

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On Friday, September 23, the Detroit Science Center unexpectedly announced that it was closing for two weeks, from September 26 through October 12, with the threat of permanent closure. One hundred employees will be laid off.

The science center defaulted last year on a \$5 million real estate loan taken out to finance an expansion in 2001, and its president, Kevin Prihod, quit his \$205,000-a-year job last month. The institution posted an operating deficit of about \$600,000 in 2009, the last year for which complete financial statements were issued.

The interim science center CEO, former Chrysler executive John Miller, claimed that the two-week shutdown would “conserve operating cash” and give time to formulate a longer-term plan to reopen the struggling institution, but there is a clear danger that the closure is permanent. The economic catastrophe in the Detroit area has produced sharp declines in ticket sales, and donations from corporations and wealthy individuals have fallen off.

The Detroit Science Center opened in 1970. Its 67-foot-wide, four-story-high IMAX Dome is the only such movie theater in Michigan. The center has an 8,700-square foot Science Hall for traveling exhibits and is one of the 10 largest science museums in the country. It was remodeled in 2001, and since its grand reopening has had more than 2.1 million visitors.

The Science Center has provided generations of families many interactive activities for youth to encourage an interest in and understanding of the sciences. It offered activities for children under 5, special programs for young people in grades K-12, traveling science programs, summer camps, and other programs.

The Detroit Children’s Museum, run by the Science

Center, is also closing. The Children’s Museum, a 93-year-old institution, was formerly operated by the Detroit Public Schools. The museum is the third oldest children’s museum in the US. It presents regular planetarium demonstrations and offers group programs to schools, daycare centers and community centers.

Talika Mahan was surprised by the announcement. She said “My family has come to the science center for many years. In fact, I was a member of the science center for several years. Kids can come and explore and find out many things. My oldest is 16 and my youngest is 3.

“I was very sad when I heard they were closing. It’s unbelievable that there are no funds.

“I’m a parent that believes in the arts. A parent has to be proactive because the arts are being taken out of the public schools. So we go to the library, and the art and science museums. One of my sons wants to be an engineer. It’s important to have other things to do besides watch TV.” The Science Museum closure follows the recent announcement that six Detroit Public Libraries will close.

“When they had members only events, the place was packed. It isn’t as though there’s no interest. I don’t understand how they say they could be out of money.

“When you have these institutes, sometimes you have people running it who are corporate types. They don’t see things the same way we do.”

Marlena Penn has worked at the Science Center for about five years. “I work here part-time. I have two jobs and go to school. I like the atmosphere here. We let our customers, the families who come, know that they’re welcome.

“They didn’t tell us everything. We won’t know until two weeks.

“Some parents home school and rely on the museum for their children’s science education. The museum is open weekdays from 9 to 3. School trips come here and on the weekend, birthday parties. We have volunteers that help the kids understand things. We also prepare students for the MEAP [Michigan’s standardized test].

“We had a special exhibit on the human body and students from Wayne State University came and used it to study anatomy.

“At the Children’s Museum, the Detroit Pistons team just recently donated things like basketballs and jerseys. It was a big event.

“The shutdown is hard for people who work here. If you have a family to support, you’ll be unemployed. A lot of people depend on this source of income to support their family.”

Officials of the science center said that the failure of a \$2 million travelling exhibition of Mexican mummies had contributed to the financial crisis. It was just one of a series of initiatives taken by the former chief executive, Prihod, in an effort to expand the center’s operations.

Prihod also backed a new public charter middle school, University Prep Science & Math, which operates on the grounds of the science center and remains open, despite the closure of all the exhibition areas.



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