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# PITTSBURGH BUSINESSTIMES

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## 'Blockbuster' exhibit sets records before it opens

Pittsburgh Business Times - by [Patty Tascarella](#)

It's been 66 million years since dinosaurs roamed the earth and more than two since their bones were on view at the **Carnegie Museum of Natural History**.

Now, the museum is gearing up for the biggest opening of its 112-year history, as 9,000 visitors are expected to file through the Nov. 17 members' preview of "Dinosaurs in Their Time," toppling the museum's one-day record of 8,000, set in January when **Citizens Bank** underwrote admissions in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

At least another 8,000 members have pre-registered to view the \$36 million exhibit on Nov. 18, Carnegie Museums Marketing Director Kitty Julian said.

The latest renovation triples the size and nearly doubles the number of dinosaurs. It's the largest renovation to date for the Oakland facility, which also houses the Carnegie Museum of Art. "Dinosaurs" opens to the public Nov. 21.

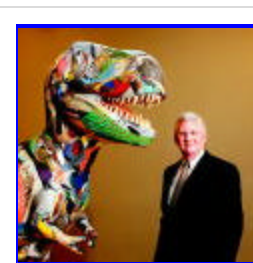
Nonmembers prebooked 925 tickets by Nov. 12, with buyers coming from as far away as Juneau, Alaska. Then there's the day after Thanksgiving, often the biggest day of the year at the Oakland museum.

"We usually see around 4,000 (that day)," Julian said.

Some in the museum world already are tossing around the term "blockbuster" when referring to "Dinosaurs."

"What the Carnegie has created is a non-touring blockbuster," American Association of Museums President Ford Bell said. "Having a blockbuster as part of your permanent collection is an incredible thing."

Nine new freestanding dinosaur skeletons have been assembled from the museum's vast fossil collection, bringing the total to 19. The exhibit's space increased from less than 8,000 square feet to 23,000. It also features more than 230 specimens of plants, fish, reptiles, birds and



Joe Wojcik

Museum board Chairman Jack Barbour says the new "Dinosaurs in Their Time" exhibit will be a "revenue-driver" for the Carnegie.

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mammals not previously included in the hall.

David Smith, the Museum of Natural History's acting co-director, along with Zhe-Xi Luo, said it is the only exhibit in the world to show dinosaurs with the plants and animals that lived at the same time.

"This will bring in people from around the country, probably from around the world," Smith said. "It's going to have an impact on tourism, hotels, restaurants and so on."

It almost guarantees repeat visits, too, he said.

"You can't absorb the entire exhibit in one visit," Smith said. "You'll want to come back very shortly."

Indeed, a second phase of "Dinosaurs" that includes the showstopper of two fighting Tyrannosaurus rex specimens will open in the spring.

Last year, VisitPittsburgh tracked 283,000 visitors to the region, accounting for more than \$62.6 million in direct spending. Vice President of Sales and Marketing Craig Davis expects 2007 to top that and 2008 to be even better. Davis said "Dinosaurs" will be "a huge anchor" and his organization will soon market a dinosaur-themed getaway package in cities within driving distance, including Cleveland; Buffalo, N.Y.; and Toronto.

Attendance has been down at the Oakland museum, and the "Dinosaurs" exhibit was partly responsible. The old Dinosaur Hall closed in early 2005 for the renovation. The museum's attendance peaked in 2001 at 683,793, but was just 496,817 last year.

"Dinosaurs are our main draw, and it took away the compelling reason to visit the museum," said Jack Barbour, chairman of the natural history museum's board for 11 years. "But there was never any question that it was the right course of action."

Barbour spearheaded fundraising for the exhibit with the museum's former Executive Director Billie DeWalt. Landing \$15 million from the state got the campaign off to a strong start. Area foundations followed suit. More than \$33 million has been raised.

Barbour hopes "Dinosaurs" will prompt donors to open their wallets wider. He'd like to add six new curator positions, each endowed with at least \$1.5 million.

"It's very difficult to raise money for research," he said, "even though that's really the backbone of the museum. It doesn't have the glamor and glitz of a blockbuster exhibit, but it's critical to the mission of the museum."

Bell believes the exhibit will "absolutely" increase research money.

"This is such a great demonstration why research is important," Bell said. "People will see the dinosaurs with the animals and ginkgo trees, and they'll understand the context, their habitat, how they interact with other species."

"Dinosaurs" will be a "revenue-driver," Barbour said. He wouldn't say how much, but, effective

Nov. 21, Museum of Natural History admissions go up by \$5, the first hike since 2004. Admissions account for almost 7 percent of overall revenue.

"With or without the dinosaurs, we felt our price was below where it should have been, based upon the costs of the museum, rates in other cities and other entertainment venues in Pittsburgh," Barbour said.

Median admission among 148 natural history museums tracked by AAM is \$6.50, but Bell doesn't believe the Carnegie price tag of \$15 for adults, \$11 for children, is high.

Memberships accounted for 3.47 percent of last year's revenue. Total members last year, by Oct. 31, were 20,000. By the same point this year, membership had already hit 23,000, Carnegie spokeswoman Betsy Momich said.

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