



A rendering of the planned four-floor expansion of the Imagine Children's Museum. The museum hopes to begin construction on the 47,000-square-foot project, in the parking lot south of its current downtown Everett site, in early 2021. (Imagine Children's Museum)

JULIE MUHLSTEIN

Museum does more than imagine, plans four-story expansion

Children are the winners as Murdock Trust's \$500,000 adds to fund drive aimed at raising \$25 million.

By [Julie Muhlstein](#)

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EVERETT JULIE MUHLSTEIN

At the Imagine Children's Museum these days, there are no little feet crossing a wooden bridge to the tree house. No small hands turn the steering wheel on an Everett Transit bus display, or pretend to fly the Imagine-Air 7CM7. Looking past the pandemic, the nonprofit that's become a popular family destination in downtown Everett has big plans.

The museum has been closed since March due to the coronavirus. Yet for several years, it's been quietly raising millions of dollars toward the goal of a major expansion.

Nancy Johnson, executive director of the Imagine Children's Museum, said the current capital campaign, with a \$25 million target, is aimed at building a four-floor addition. The project would nearly double the size of the museum at 1502 Wall St.

"We were doing so well, we were almost at the halfway mark," Johnson said of the fundraising effort Thursday. "Then COVID knocked on the door. Like everyone, we had to say, 'Now what?'"

Rather than scale back, a decision was made to forge ahead. Through fundraising more than a decade ago, the museum bought the parking lot along Hoyt Avenue adjacent to and immediately south of its current home. That's where plans call for construction of the four-story, 47,000-foot building addition.

"We are taking this head on," Johnson said. At a time when so much has been cut, "this project will bring jobs and economic vitality." Johnson did not name a design team or construction company for the project, which she said could be started by February 2021 and completed sometime in 2022.

The campaign received a significant boost from the M.J. Murdock Charitable Trust, which recently announced a \$500,000 grant to the museum. Based in Vancouver, Washington, the trust was created by the will of the late Melvin J. "Jack" Murdock. Since 1975, it has donated more than \$1 billion to nonprofits around the Northwest. Murdock was the founder of Tektronix, Inc., a manufacturer of test and measurement devices.

"We are grateful for organizations like the Imagine Children's Museum that help inspire individuals and families, particularly young children, through engaging, playful learning," said Dr. Steve Moore, the trust's executive director, in a statement announcing the grant.



An artist's rendering shows features planned for the first floor of an expansion of the Imagine Children's Museum. The area will include a representation of the old bicycle tree in Snohomish and an outdoorsy Camp Imagine. (Imagine Children's Museum)

The project's design includes plenty of space for play and education. Its first floor features woodland habitats, a treetop canopy area, puppet theater, and a make-believe fishing pond and wildlife rescue center. For the second floor, a Puget Sound ecosystem exhibit with an intertidal aquarium are planned, plus areas for hands-on engineering, an art studio and maker space, delivery and logistics play, and maritime exploration. An auditorium and eatery are planned for the third floor, and learning labs are on the top floor.

A crane cab planned for the building's exterior won't be part of the actual construction job — it's for kids to play in, getting a glimpse of what that type of work is like.

Johnson said movement between the existing museum and the new section will be "seamless," with the current rooftop play area accessible from the addition's second floor.

Crowding — created by the museum's popularity — is the major reason for growth, she said. Founded as a grassroots effort in 1991, the museum was once housed in leased spaces, at the Marysville Town Center and on Everett's Colby Avenue. In 2004, it moved to its current home, a building purchased with a \$1 million donation from philanthropists John and IdaMae Schack.

"In 2004, we anticipated we'd have 60,000 visitors a year," Johnson said. By 2018, the annual tally of guests had grown to 258,000. A big goal of the expansion is more room for kids to enjoy exhibits by playing and interacting together with adults. Today, grownups often have to stand aside to make space for all the children.

The facility remains closed for now, although last week Gov. Jay Inslee issued detailed requirements that would allow for museums to operate in Phase 2, Snohomish County's status, and in Phase 3 of his four-phase Safe Start plan.

Johnson said the grant application was made prior to the pandemic, and that the Murdock Trust was supportive of the museum going ahead with its bold expansion.

During the coronavirus crisis, she worries that for children living in difficult situations "it got way more difficult."

"We think it's going to be many years of healing," Johnson said. "The museum is a resource for children and families. Physically and emotionally, it's a safe place to be."

It's a wonderful place to be. An annual museum membership has been a welcome Christmas gift for my three Seattle grandsons from their Nana. The museum is a lure that keeps them happily visiting Everett.



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The Imagine Children's Museum has pushed through difficult times before.

"Our very first capital campaign, we started it when 9/11 hit. We had the same really hard discussions," Johnson said. Again in 2008, the start of the Great Recession, the museum raised \$5 million. Around that time, it bought the parking lot.

The Murdock Trust also invested in those efforts, which Dr. Clay Wertheimer, the Imagine Children's Museum board president, acknowledged after the \$500,000 grant was awarded. "We're incredibly grateful to the Murdock Trust for their continued investment in our museum and in educational play for children," he said in a statement.

"We thought about a much smaller project, but decided 'Let's do this right.' It takes courage. It takes hope," Johnson said. "Children and families deserve this."

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Learn more

The Imagine Children's Museum is closed due to the pandemic, but offers online programs such as camps and classes. Information about classes or how to donate at: www.imagineecm.org

